

The Pillar of Light

To end the intolerable strain of his thoughts Stephen Brand forced his lips to a thin smile and his voice to say harshly:

"If the worst comes to the worst, there are more than three thousand gallons of colza oil in store. That should maintain life. It is a vegetable oil."

Then Constance thrust her glowing face into the lighted area.

"Dad," she cried, cheerfully, "the men wish to know if they may smoke. Poor fellows! They are so miserable — so cold and damp and dreary down there. Please say 'Yes.'"

CHAPTER IX

MRS. VANSITTART

THE purser, faithful to his trust, had secured the ship's books. He alone, among the survivors of the *Chinook*, had brought a parcel of any sort from that ill-fated ship. The others possessed the clothes they wore, their money, and in some cases their trinkets.

Mr. Emmett suggested that a list of those saved should be compiled. Then, by ticking off the names, he could classify the inmates of the lighthouse and evolve some degree of order in the community.

It was found that there were thirty-seven officers and men, including stewards, thirty-three saloon passengers, of whom nineteen were women, counting the two little girls, and seven men and one woman from the steerage.

"It isn't usual, on a British ship, for the crew to bulk so large on the list," said Mr. Emmett huskily. "But it couldn't be helped. The passengers had to be batted down. They couldn't live on deck. We never gave in until the last minute."

"I saw that," said Brand, knowing the agony which prompted the broken explanation.

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"An' not a mother's soul would have escaped if it wasn't for young Mr. Pyne," went on the sailor.

"Is that the name of the youngster who climbed the fore-mast?"

"That's him. It was a stroke of genius, his catching onto that way out. He was as cool as a cucumber. Just looked up when he reached the deck an' saw the lighthouse so near. Then he asked me for a rope. Planned the whole thing in a second, so to speak."

"He is not one of the ship's company?"

"No, sir, a passenger, neevy of Cyrus J. Traill, the Philadelphian millionaire. Haven't you heard of Traill? Not much of a newspaper reader, eh? There was a lady on board, a Mrs. Vansittart, who was coming over to marry old Traill, so people said, and the weddin' was fixed to take place in Paris next week. Young Pyne was actin' as escort."

"Is she lost? What a terrible thing!"

The chief officer glanced down the purser's lists and slapped his thigh with much vehemence.

"No, by gosh! Here she is, marked O. K. Well, that beats the band."

"So the lad has discharged his trust to his uncle?"

Mr. Emmett was going to say something, but checked the words on his lips.

"Queer world," he muttered. "Queer world."

With that he devoted himself to planning out the watches. Soon he and the purser betook themselves to the depths with a roll-call. As they crept below gingerly — these sailor-men were not at home on com-

Mrs. Vansittart

panion ladders which moved not when the shock came — they met Enid, for the first time. She, coming up, held the swinging lantern level with her face. They hung back politely.

"Please come," she cried in her winsome way. "These stairs are too narrow for courtesy."

They stepped heavily onward. She flitted away. Emmett raised his lantern between the purser's face and his own.

"What do you think of *that*?" he whispered, awe-stricken.

The man of accounts smiled broadly.

"Pretty girl!" he agreed, with crudely emphatic superlatives.

Emmett shook his head. He murmured to himself: "I guess I'm tired. I see things."

Enid handed an armful of dry linen to the damp, steaming women in the lower bedroom. She was hurrying out; someone overtook her at the door. It was Mrs. Vansittart.

"Miss Brand," she said, with her all-sufficing smile, "give me one moment."

They stood in the dark and hollow-sounding stairway. The seas were lashing the column repeatedly, but the night's ordeal was nearly ended. Even a timid child might know now that the howling terror without had done its worst and failed. From the cavernous depths, mingling with the rumble of the storm, came the rhythm of a hymn. Those left in gloom by the

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withdrawal of Mr. Emmett's lantern were cheering their despondent souls.

Surprised, even whilst Enid awaited the older woman's demand, the listeners heard the words:

"Awake, my soul, and with the sun
Thy daily stage of duty run;
Shake off dull sloth, and joyful rise
To pay thy morning sacrifice."

The rough tones of the men were softened and harmonized by the distance. It was a chant of praise, of thanksgiving, the offering of those who had been snatched from death and from mortal fear more painful than death.

The singing ceased as suddenly as it began. Mr. Emmett and the purser were warning the first watch.

The interruption did not seem to help Mrs. Vansittart. She spoke awkwardly, checking her thoughts as though fearful she might be misunderstood, or say too much.

"I am better," she explained, "quite recovered. I — gave up my bunk to one who needed it."

"I am sure we are all doing our best to help one another," volunteered Enid.

"But I am restless. The sight — of your sister — aroused vague memories. Do you mind — I find it hard to explain — your name is familiar. I knew — some people — called Brand — a Mr. Stephen Brand — and his wife."

She halted, seemingly at a loss. Enid, striving help-

Mrs. Vansittart

lessly to solve the reason for this unexpected confidence, but quite wishful to make the explanation easier, found herself interested.

"Yes," she said. "That is quite possible, of course, though you must have been quite a girl. Mrs. Brand died many years ago."

Mrs. Vansittart flinched from the feeble rays of the lantern.

"That is so — I think I heard of — of Mrs. Brand's death — in London, I fancy. But — they had only one child."

Enid laughed.

"I am a mere nobody," she said. "Dad adopted me. I came here one day in June, nineteen years ago, and I must have looked so forlorn that he took me to his heart — thank God!"

Another solemn chord of the hymn floated up to them:

"Let all thy converse be sincere,
Thy conscience as the noonday clear."

The rest of the verse evaded them. Probably a door was closed.

Mrs. Vansittart seemed to be greatly perturbed. Enid, intent on the occupation of the moment, believed their little chat was ended. To round it off, so to speak, she went on quickly:

"I imagine I am the most mysterious person living, in my early history, I mean. Mr. Brand saw me floating towards this lighthouse in a deserted boat. I was

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nearly dead. The people who had been with me were gone, either starved and thrown into the sea or knocked overboard during a collision, as the boat was badly damaged. My linen was marked 'E. T.' That is the only definite fact I can tell you. All the rest is guess-work. Evidently, nobody cared to claim me. And here I am."

Mrs. Vansittart was leaning back in the deep gloom, supporting herself against the door of the bedroom.

"What a romance!" she said, faintly.

"A vague one, and this is no time to gossip about it. Can I get you anything?"

Enid felt that she really must not prolong their conversation, and the other woman's exclamation threatened further talk.

"No, thank you. You'll excuse me, I know. My natural interest —"

But Enid, with a parting smile, was halfway toward the next landing, and Mrs. Vansittart was free to re-enter the crowded apartment where her fellow-sufferers were wondering when they would see daylight again. She did not stir. The darkness was intense, the narrow passage draughty, and the column thrilled and quivered in an unnerving manner. She heard the clang of a door above and knew that Enid had gone into the second apartment given over to the women. Somewhere, higher up, was the glaring light of which she had a faint recollection, though she was almost unconscious when unbound from the rope and carried into the service-room.

Mrs. Vansittart

And at that moment, not knowing it, she had been near to Stephen Brand, might have spoken to him, looked into his face. What was he like, she wondered. Had he aged greatly with the years? A lighthouse-keeper! Of all professions in this wide world how came he to adopt that? And what ugly trick was fate about to play her that she should be cast ashore on this desolate rock where he was in charge? Could she avoid him? Had she been injudicious in betraying her knowledge of the past? And how marvelous was the likeness between Constance and her father! The chivalrous, high-minded youth she had known came back to her through the mists of time. The calm, proud eyes, the firm mouth, the wide expanse of forehead were his. From her mother — the woman who "died many years ago," when she, Mrs. Vansittart, was "quite a girl" — the girl inherited the clear profile, the wealth of dark-brown hair, and a grace of movement not often seen in Englishwomen.

Though her teeth chattered with the cold, Mrs. Vansittart could not bring herself to leave the vault-like stairway. Once more the hymn-singers cheered their hearts with words of praise. Evidently, there was one among them who not only knew the words but could lead them mightily in the tunes of many old favorites.

The opening of a door — caused by the passing to and fro of some of the ship's officers — brought to her distracted ears the concluding bars of a verse. When the voices swelled forth again she caught the full refrain:

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“Raise thine eyes to heaven
When thy spirits quail,
When, by tempests driven,
Heart and courage fail.”

Such a message might well carry good cheer to all who heard, yet Mrs. Vansittart listened as one in a trance, to whom the divinest promise was a thing unasked for and unrecognized. After passing through the greater peril of the reef in a state of supine consciousness, she was now moved to extreme activity by a more personal and selfish danger. There was she, a human atom, to be destroyed or saved at the idle whim of circumstance: here, with life and many things worth living for restored to her safe keeping, she saw imminent risk of a collapse with which the nebulous dangers of the wreck were in no way comparable. It would have been well for her could she only realize the promise of the hymn: “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

Not so ran Mrs. Vansittart's jumble of thoughts. The plans, the schemes, the builded edifice of many years, threatened to fall in ruin about her. In such bitter mood there was no consolation. She sought not to find spiritual succor, but bewailed the catastrophe which had befallen her.

It assuredly contributed to that “affliction which is but for a moment,” that Constance should happen just then to run up the stairs towards the hospital. Each flight was so contrived that it curved across two-thirds

Mrs. Vansittart

of the superficial area allotted to the stairway. Anyone ascending made a complete turn to the right-about to reach the door of the room on any given landing and the foot of the ladder to the next.

Hence, the girl came unexpectedly face to face with Mrs. Vansittart. The meeting startled her. This pale woman, so thinly clad in the demi-toilette of evening wear on ship-board, should not be standing there.

“Is anything wrong?” she cried, raising her lantern just as Enid did when she encountered the sailors.

“No, no,” said the other, passing a nervous hand over her face. Constance, with alert intelligence, fancied she dreaded recognition.

“Then why are you standing here? It is so cold. You will surely make yourself ill.”

“I was wondering if I might see Mr. Brand,” came the desperate answer, the words bubbling forth with unrestrained vehemence.

“See my father?” repeated the girl. She took thought for an instant. The lighthouse-keeper would not be able to leave the lamp for nearly three hours. When dawn came, she knew he would have many things to attend to, signals to the Land's End, the arrangement of supplies, which he had already mentioned to her, and a host of other matters. Four o'clock in the morning was an unconventional hour for an interview, but time itself was topsy-turvy under the conditions prevalent on the Gulf Rock.

“I will ask him,” she went on harriedly, with an un-

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comfortable feeling that Mrs. Vansittart resented her judicial pause.

"Thank you."

To the girl's ears the courteous acknowledgment conveyed an odd note of menace. If the eyes are the windows of the soul surely the voice is its subtle gauge. The more transparently simple, clean-minded the hearer, the more accurate is the resonant impression. Constance found herself vaguely perplexed by two jostling abstractions. If they took shape it was in mute questioning. Why was Mrs. Vansittart so anxious to revive, or, it might be, probe, long-buried memories, and why did her mobile smile seem to veil a hostile intent?

But the fresh, gracious maidenhood in her cast aside these unwonted studies in mind-reading.

"He has so much to do," she explained. "Although there are many of us on the rock tonight he has never been so utterly alone. Won't you wait inside until I return?"

"Not unless I am in the way," pleaded the other. "I was choking in there. The air here, the space, are so grateful."

So Constance passed her. Mrs. Vansittart noted the dainty manner in which she picked up her skirts to mount the stairs. She caught a glimpse of the tailor-made gown, striped silk underskirt, well-fitting, low-heeled, wide-welted expensive boots. Trust a woman to see all these things at a glance, with even the shifting glimmer of a storm-proof lantern to aid the quick appraisal.

Mrs. Vansittart

As the girl went out of her sight a reminiscence came to her.

"No wonder I was startled," she communed. "That sailor's coat she wears helps the resemblance. Probably it is her father's."

Then the loud silence of the lighthouse appalled her. The singing had ceased, or was shut off by a closed door. One might be in a tomb as surrounded by this tangible darkness. The tremulous granite, so cold and hard, yet alive in its own grim strength, the murmuring commotion of wind and waves swelling and dying in ghost-like echoes, suggested a grave, a vault close sealed from the outer world, though pulsating with the far-away existence of heedless multitudes. Thus, brooding in the gloom, a tortured soul without form and void, she awaited the return of her messenger.

Constance, after looking in at the hospital, went on to the service-room. Her father was not there. She glanced up to the trimming-stage, expecting to see him attending to the lamp. No. He had gone. Somewhat bewildered, for she was almost certain he was not in any of the lower apartments, she climbed to the little door in the glass frame.

Ah! There he was, on the landward side of the gallery. What was the matter now? Surely there was not another vessel in distress. However, being relieved from any dubiety as to his whereabouts she went back to the service-room and gave herself the luxury of a moment's rest. Oh, how tired she was! Not until she sat down did she realize what it meant to live as she

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had lived, and to do all that she had done, during the past four hours.

Her respite was of short duration. Brand, his oilskins gleaming with wet, came in.

"Hello, sweetheart, what's up now?" he cried, in such cheerful voice that she knew all was well.

"That was exactly what I was going to ask you," she said.

"The *Falcon* is out there," he replied, with a side nod towards Mount's Bay.

Constance knew that the *Falcon* was a sturdy steam-trawler, a bull-dog little ship, built to face anything in the shape of gales.

"They can do nothing, of course," she commented.

"No. I stood between them and the light for a second, and they evidently understood that I was on the lookout, as a lantern dipped seven times, which I interpreted as meaning that they will return at daybreak. Now they are off to Penzance again."

"They turned safely then?"

"Shipped a sea or two, no doubt. The wind is dropping, but the sea is running mountains high."

He had taken off his oilskins. Constance suddenly felt a strong disinclination to rise. Being a strong-willed young person, she sprang up instantly.

"I came to ask you if you can see Mrs. Vansittart," she said.

"Mrs. Vansittart!" he cried, with a genuine surprise that thrilled her with a pleasure she assuredly could not account for.

Mrs. Vansittart

"Yes. She asked if she might have a word with you."

He threw his hands up in comic despair.

"Tell the good lady I am up to my eyes in work. The oil is running low. I must hie me to the pump at once. I have my journal to fill. If there is no sun I cannot heliograph and I have a host of signals to look up and get ready. And, a word in your ear, Connie dear. We will be 'at home' on the rock for the next forty-eight hours. Give the lady my very deep regrets and ask her to allow me to send for her when I have a minute to spare, some hours hence."

She kissed him.

"You dear old thing," she cried. "You will tire yourself to death, I am sure."

He caught her by the chin.

"Mark my words," he laughed. "You will feel this night in your bones longer than I. By the way, no matter who goes hungry, don't prepare any breakfast until I come to you. I suppose the kitchen is your headquarters?"

"Yes, though Enid has had far more of Mr. Pyne's company. She is cook, you know."

"Is Pyne there too?"

"He is laundry-maid, drying clothes."

"I think I shall like him," mused Brand. "He seems to be a helpful sort of youngster. That reminds me. Tell him to report himself to Mr. Emmett as my assistant,—if he cares for the post, that is."

He did not see the ready spirit of mischief that danced

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in her eyes. She pictured Mr. Pyne "fixing things" with Mr. Emmett "mighty quick."

When she reached the first bedroom floor Mrs. Vansittart had gone.

"I thought it would be strange if she stood long in this draught," mused Constance. She opened the door. The lady she sought was leaning disconsolate against a wall.

"My father —" she began.

"I fear I was thoughtless," interrupted Mrs. Vansittart. "He must be greatly occupied. Of course, I can see him in the morning before the vessel comes. They *will* send a ship soon to take us off?"

"At the earliest possible moment," was the glad answer. "Indeed, dad has just been signalling to a tug which will return at daybreak."

There was a joyous chorus from the other inmates. Constance had not the requisite hardihood to tell them how they misconstrued her words.

As she quitted them she admitted to herself that Mrs. Vansittart, though disturbing in some of her moods, was really very considerate. It never occurred to her that her new acquaintance might have suddenly discovered the exceeding wisdom of a proverb concerning second thoughts.

Indeed, Mrs. Vansittart now bitterly regretted the impulse which led her to betray any knowledge of Stephen Brand or his daughter. Of all the follies of a wayward life, that was immeasurably the greatest, in Mrs. Vansittart's critical scale.

Mrs. Vansittart

But what would you? It is not often given to a woman of nerves, a woman of volatile nature, a shallow worldling, yet versed in the deepest wiles of intrigue, to be shipwrecked, to be plucked from a living hell, to be swung through a hurricane to the secure insecurity of a dark and hollow pillar standing on a Calvary of storm-tossed waves, and then, whilst her senses swam in utmost bewilderment, to be confronted with a living ghost.

Yet that was precisely what had happened to her.

Fate is grievous at times. This haven of refuge was a place of torture. Mrs. Vansittart broke down and wept in her distress.