

CHAPTER XVI

STEPHEN BRAND EXPLAINS

THEY were interrupted. Elsie, with her golden hair and big blue eyes, pink cheeks and parted lips, appeared on the stairs. All that was visible was her head. She looked like one of Murillo's angels.

"Please, can Mamie 'n' me see the man?" she asked, a trifle awed. She did not expect to encounter a stern-faced official in uniform.

"What man, dearie?" he said, and instantly the child gained confidence, with that prompt abandonment to a favorable first impression which marks the exceeding wisdom of children and dogs.

She directed an encouraging *sotto voce* down the stairs:

"Come right 'long, Mamie."

Then she answered, claspng the hand Pyne extended to her, but eying Brand the while:

"The man who brought the milk."

She wondered why they laughed, but the lighthouse-keeper caught her up in his arms.

"He has gone away, sweetheart," he said, "but when he comes in the morning I shall send for you and you

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will see him. You are the little girl who was injured, eh? Are you getting better?"

Elsie, having seen Mamie safely extracted from the stair-way, became voluble.

"My elbow is stiff, but it doesn't hurt. I was feelin' pretty bad 'fore the milk came, but Mamie 'n' me had a lovely lot, an' some beautiful jelly. Fine, wasn't it, Mamie?"

"Squizzit!" agreed Mamie.

"I think I'd like being here if there was more room," said the child. "An' why isn't there any washin'? Mamie 'n' me is always bein' washed 'cept when we're here."

"Surely you have not kept your face as clean as it is now ever since you left the ship?"

"Oh, no," put in Mamie. "We've just been rubbed with a hanky."

"And sent out to pay a call?"

"Not 'zactly," said truthful Mamie. "Mr. Pyne told us to wait near the door —"

"That's an old story now," intervened Pyne quickly. "Climb up on my shoulder and have a look at the sea. Perhaps there may be a ship, too."

"What did Mr. Pyne tell you?" whispered Brand, pretending to make a secret of it with Elsie.

"There didn't seem to be 'nuff to eat," she explained, seriously, "so Mr. Pyne kep' a bit of biscuit in his pocket, an' Mamie 'n' me had a chew every time we saw him."

"H'm," murmured the man, glancing up at his young

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friend as he walked around the trimming-stage with the delighted Mamie. "I suppose he asked you not to tell anybody?"

"We wasn't to tell Miss Constance or Miss Enid. An' they tole us we wasn't to tell him about the sweet stuff they put in our tea. That is all. Funny, isn't it?"

Brand knew that these little ones were motherless. His eyes dimmed somewhat. Like all self-contained men, he detested any exhibition of sentiment.

"I say," he cried huskily to Pyne, "you must escort your friends back to their quarters. No more idling, please."

"An' you will really send for us tomorrow to see the milkman?" said Elsie. Notwithstanding his sudden gruffness, she was not afraid of him. She looked longingly at the great lamp and the twinkling diamonds of the dioptric lens.

"Yes. I will not forget. Good-by, now, dearie."

The visit of the children had given him a timely reminder. As these two were now so had his own loved ones been in years that might not be recalled.

The nest would soon be empty, the young birds flown. He realized that he would not be many days ashore before the young American to whom he had taken such a liking would come to him and put forward a more enduring claim to Constance than Mr. Traill made with regard to Enid. Well, he must resign himself to these things, though no man ever lost two daughters under stranger conditions.

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When Pyne returned, Brand was ready for him. The struggle was sharp, but it had ended.

"I would like you to read your uncle's letter," he said. "I am clear in my own mind as to the right course to adopt. If Mr. Traill wishes to win Enid's affections he will not take her by surprise. Indeed, he himself recognizes this element in the situation. You will not rush away from Penzance at once, I take it?"

"No, sir," said Pyne, with a delightful certainty of negation that caused a smile to brighten his hearer's face.

"I may not get clear of the rock for several days. There is much to place in order here. When the relief comes, I must help the men to make things ship-shape. Meanwhile, Stanhope — or Constance, whom you can take into your confidence — will smooth the way —"

"No, sir," interrupted Pyne, even more emphatically. "When you come to know my uncle you will find that he plays the game all the time. If Enid is to be given a new parent the old one will make the gift. And that's a fact."

Brand waived the point.

"The girls have plenty to endure here without having this surprise sprung on them," he said. "I will write to Mr. Traill, and leave events ashore in his hands."

So, for a night and the better part of a day, the pillar locked in its recesses some new doubts and cogitations. As between the two men a stronger bond of sympathy was created. Pyne, in those restless hours, was admirably tactful. He talked a great deal of his uncle.

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Soon, not only Brand, but the two girls, seemed to be well acquainted with a man they had never met.

With the morning tide the anarchy of the waves ceased. The children were brought to the lantern to witness a more majestic sight than the arrival of the "milkman." With the dawn the sun appeared, and the sea seemed to sink into long-deferred slumber under his potency.

The flood tide of the afternoon brought the unfailing tug, towing the Penzance life-boat. The crane was swung out and Jack Stanhope, as was his right, was first to be hoisted to the entrance and to exchange a hearty hand grip with Brand.

Behind the lighthouse-keeper were ranged many faces, but not that which the sailor sought.

"Where is Enid?" he asked, after the first words of congratulation were spoken. "Have you told her?"

"No. Here is Mr. Pyne. He will take you to the girls and tell you what we have decided."

The two young men looked at each other with frank friendliness.

"When we have a minute to spare you must take me to the gallery and explain just how you worked that trick," said Stanhope. "Brand's semaphore was to the point, but it omitted details."

"That is where I have the pull of you," responded Pyne with equal cordiality. "I don't require any telling about your work yesterday."

"Oh, people make such a fuss. What is there remarkable in guiding a boat through a rough sea?"

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"I may be wrong, but it looks a heap harder than swarming up a pole."

In such wise did young Britain and young America pooh-pooh the idea that they had done aught heroic.

Indeed, their brief talk dealt next with Enid, and Lieutenant Stanhope, R. N., did not think he was outraging conventionality when he found Enid in the kitchen, and took her in his arms and kissed her.

Constance and Pyne discovered that the tug as seen through the window was a very interesting object.

"You don't feel at all lonesome?" he murmured to her.

"Not in the least."

"It must do a fellow a heap of good to meet his best girl under such circumstances."

"Mr. Stanhope and my sister have been the greatest of friends for years."

"Is it possible to catch up? The last few days on the rock ought to figure high in averages."

"Jack," cried Constance, finding this direct attack somewhat disconcerting, "did my father say that any arrangements were to be made for landing?"

"Yes, miss," interposed a sailor at the door. "The skipper's orders are: 'Women an' children to muster on the lower deck.'"

Then began a joyous yet strangely pathetic procession, headed by Elsie and Mamie, who were carried downstairs by the newly arrived lighthouse-men. The children cried and refused to be comforted until Pyne descended with them to the life-boat. The women fol-

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lowed, in terrible plight, notwithstanding the wraps sent them on the previous day. Each, as they passed Stephen Brand, bade him farewell and tearfully asked the Lord to bless him and his.

Among them came Mrs. Vansittart. Her features were veiled more closely than ever. Whilst she stood behind the others in the entrance, her glance was fixed immovably on Brand's face. No Sybilline propheticess could have striven more eagerly to wrest the secrets of his soul from its lineaments. Nevertheless, when he turned to her with his pleasant smile and parting words of comfort, she averted her eyes, uttered an incoherent phrase of thanks for his kindness, and seemed to be unduly terrified by the idea that she must be swung into the life-boat by the crane.

She held out her hand. It was cold and trembling.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently, patting her on the shoulder as one might reassure a timid child. "Sit down and hold the rope. The basket cannot possibly be overturned."

Pyne, helping to unload the tremulous passengers beneath, noted the lady's attitude, and added a fresh memorandum to the stock he had already accumulated.

"Who is that?" asked Brand from the purser, who stood beside him.

"Mrs. Vansittart."

Brand experienced a momentary surprise.

"She seemed to avoid me," he thought, but the incident did not linger in his mind.

The life-boat, rising and falling on the strong and

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partly broken swell, required the most expert management if the weary people on the rock were to be taken off in safety.

When Constance and Enid, followed by Stanhope, reached the boat after giving Brand a farewell hug, there was no more room. The crew pulled off towards the waiting vessel, and here a specially prepared gangway rendered the work of transshipment easy.

Mr. Traill was leaning over the bulwark as the life-boat ranged alongside. He singled out Pyne at once, and gave him a cheery cry of recognition. At first he could not distinguish Mrs. Vansittart, and, indeed, it must be confessed that he was striving most earnestly to descry one face which had come back to him out of the distant years.

When his glance fell on Enid, his nephew, who was thinking how best to act under the circumstances, was assured that the father saw in the girl the living embodiment of her mother.

He thought it would be so. His own recollection of his aunt's portraits had already helped him to this conclusion, and how much more startling must a flesh and blood creation be than the effort of an artist to place on canvas the fugitive expression which constitutes the greatest charm of a mobile countenance.

Enid, having heard so much about Mr. Pyne's uncle, was innocently curious to meet him. At first she was vaguely bewildered. The sunken eyes were fixed on hers with an intensity that gave her a momentary sense of embarrassment. Luckily the exigencies of the hour

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offered slight scope to emotion. All things were unreal, out of drawing with previous experiences of her well-ordered life. The irregular swaying of the boat and the tug seemed to typify the new phase.

Pyne swung himself to the steamer's deck before the gangway was made fast, thereby provoking a loud outcry from the deserted children.

Grasping his uncle's hand he said:

"Wait until you read Brand's letter. No one else knows."

So, Mr. Traill, with fine self-control, greeted Mrs. Vansittart affectionately, and handed her over to a stewardess, who took her to a cabin specially prepared for her. Her low-spoken words were not quite what he expected.

"Don't kiss me," she murmured, "and please don't look at me. In my present condition I cannot bear it."

Relatives of the shipwrecked passengers and crew, many of whom were waiting in Penzance, were not allowed on board. This arrangement was made by Mr. Traill after consulting a local committee organized to help the unfortunates who needed help so greatly. The unanimous opinion was expressed that a few lady members of the committee, supplied with an abundance of clothing, etc., would afford prompt relief to the sufferers, whilst the painful scenes which must follow the meeting of survivors with their friends would cause confusion and delay on the vessel.

Pyne, watching all things, saw that Mrs. Vansittart did not meet his uncle with the eagerness of a woman

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restored to the arms of the man she was about to marry.

She was distraught, aloof in her manner, apparently interested only in his eager assurance that she would find an assortment of new garments in the cabin.

The millionaire himself was too flustered to draw nice distinctions between the few words she spoke and what he expected her to say. When she quitted him he walked towards the group of young people. They were laughingly exchanging news and banter as if all that had gone before were the events of a lively picnic. At last, he met Enid.

Pyne introduced his uncle, and it was a trying experience for this man to stand face to face with his daughter. In each quick flash of her delighted eyes, in every tone of her sweet voice, in every winsome smile and graceful gesture, he caught and vivified long-dormant memories of his greatly loved wife of nineteen years ago.

Somehow he was glad Mrs. Vansittart had not lingered by his side. The discovery of Enid's identity involved considerations so complex and utterly unforeseen that he needed time and anxious thought to arrange his plans for the future.

The animated bustle on deck prevented anything in the nature of sustained conversation. Luckily, Mr. Traill himself, whose open-handed generosity had made matters easy for the reception committee, was in constant demand.

Mrs. Sheppard had sent a portmanteau for Constance

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and Enid, so they, too, soon scurried below with the others.

The life-boat returned to the rock, where the four lighthouse men sent to relieve Brand were now helping the sailors to carry the injured men downstairs and assisting the sick to reach the entrance.

As soon as this second batch was transferred to the tug, the vessel started for Penzance; the Trinity tender would land the others.

There was a scene of intense enthusiasm when the steamer reached the dock. The vociferous cheering of the townspeople smothered the deep agony of some who waited there, knowing all too well they would search in vain for their loved ones among these whom death had spared.

The two girls modestly escaped at the earliest moment from the shed used as a reception-room. All the inhabitants knew them personally or by sight; they attracted such attention that they gladly relinquished to other hands any further charge of the shipwrecked people. So, after a few words of farewell for the hour, Stanhope piloted them to a waiting carriage and drove away with them.

Mrs. Vansittart did not emerge from her cabin until the deck was deserted. She found Mr. Traill looking for her. In a neat black dress and feather hat she was rehabilitated.

"Why didn't you show up earlier?" he asked in good-humored surprise. "The breeze on deck was first-rate. It brought the color into many a pale cheek.

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And the way in which the crowd let itself go was splendid. Look at these waiting thousands — quivering yet with excitement!"

"I am worn out," she said quietly; "take me to your hotel. You have engaged rooms there I suppose?"

"Of course."

"When do you purpose leaving Penzance?"

"Well — er — that is part of the explanation I promised you."

"We can talk matters over in the hotel. Where is your nephew?"

For the first time he marked her air of constraint.

"Believe me, Etta," he said hurriedly, "that what I have to tell you will come as a great surprise, but it should be a very pleasant one."

"Anything that gratifies you will be welcomed by me," she said simply. "You have not said where Charlie is."

"Hiding in that shed. He refused Mr. Stanhope's offer of a rig-out on board. In his present disguise he passes as a stoker, and everybody wants to see the man who saved all of you."

"Have you a closed carriage here?"

"Yes."

"Let us go. Charlie can come with us."

Again he was conscious of a barrier between them, but he attributed her mood to the strain she had undergone.

In the shed they found Pyne; with him were the orphaned children; there was none to meet them. Kind