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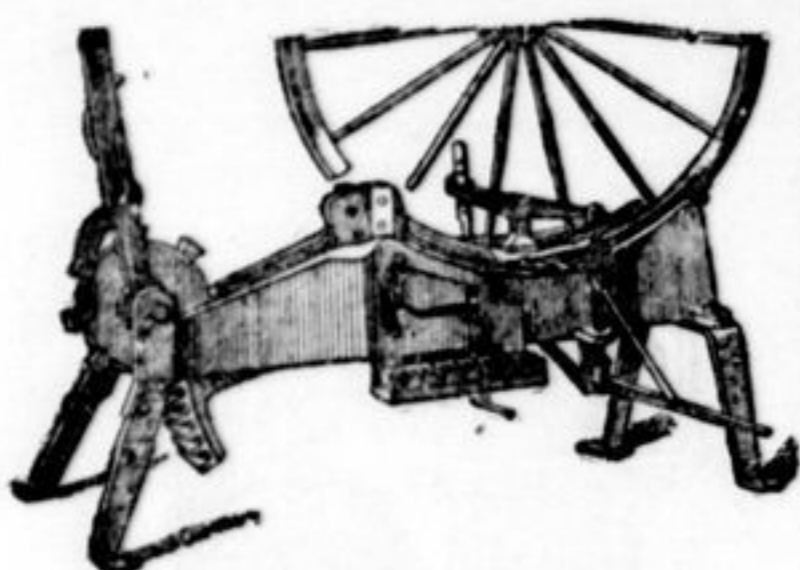
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Near the Garafra St. Bridge

THE Pillar of Light

By Louis Tracy

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CHAPTER VI. THE MIDDLE WATCH

It says a good deal for Stephen Brand's courage that he was able to laugh just then, but it is a fine thing for a man, in a moment of supreme danger, to be called on to comfort a weeping woman.

The next minute might be their last—that of that he was fully conscious. Even before the girls reached his side he felt a curious lifting movement of the whole frame of the lantern. Steel and glass alike were yielding to the sustained violence of the wind-pressure. Well were they molded, by men whose conscience need harbor no reproach of dishonest craftsmanship; they were being tested now almost beyond endurance.

Some natures would have found relief in prayer. Gladly would Constance and Enid have sunk on their knees and besought the Master of the Winds to spare them and those at sea. But Brand, believing that a catastrophe was imminent decided that in order to save the girls' lives he must neither alarm them nor lose an unnecessary instant.

To desert the light—that was impossible personally. If given the least warning, he would spring towards the iron rail that curved by the side of the stairs to the service-room, and take his chance. Otherwise he would go with the lamp. There was no other alternative. The girls must leave him at once.

The laugh with which he greeted their appearance gave him time to scheme.

"I ought to scold you, but I won't," he cried. "Are you plucky enough to descend to the kitchen and make three nice cups of cocoa?"

Just think what it cost him to speak in this bantering way, careless of words, though each additional syllable might mean death to all three.

His request had the exact effect he calculated. For once, Constance was deceived, and looked her surprise. Enid, more volatile, smiled through her tears. So it was not quite as bad as they imagined, this gale. Their father could never be so matter-of-fact in the face of real peril to all of them. Cocoa! Fancy a man giving his thoughts to cocoa whilst they were expecting the lighthouse to be hurled into the English Channel.

He turned again to manipulate the brass screws.

"Now, do not stand there shivering," he said, "but harden your hearts and go. Use the oil stove. By the time it is ready—"

"Shivering, indeed!"

Constance, of the Viking breed, would let him see that he had no monopoly of the family motto: "Audeo." She, too, could dare.

"Down you go, Enid," she cried. "He shall have his cocoa, poor man."

He looked over his shoulder and caught his daughter glancing at him from the well of the stairs.

"Bad night," he shouted cheerfully, and he cheated her quick intelligence a second time.

They were gone. Perchance it was his last sight of them in this life. Three times the stalwart frame-work creaked. Once it moved so perceptibly that the curtain rings jingled. Then he remembered the words of Isaiah:

"For thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall."

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The blast of the terrible ones! What a vivid pen-picture of the awesome forces of nature. How long would this tornado continue? Already it must have strewn its path with havoc at sea and on land. His physical senses were elevated to the supernatural. He seemed to acquire abnormal powers of sight and hearing. He could see the trees bending before the wrathful wind, hear the crashing tiles and brickwork as houses were demolished and people hurled to death. But there was no ecstasy of soul, no mental altitude. In quick reaction came the fanciful memory of the hardy old salt who cheered his shipmates during a terrific gale with the trite remark:

"I pity the poor folk ashore on a night like this."

What a curious jumble of emotions jostled in his brain. A step from the sublime to the ridiculous! Not even a step. They were inextricably interwoven, the wof and the warp of things. He recalled the odd expression of an officer who had passed unscathed through the inferno of Spion Kop.

"I had no sense of fear," said he, "but my teeth began to ache."

Brand, a student, even of himself, discovered that his dominant sensation was one of curiosity.

"If it has to be," said his nervous system, "let it come quickly." He felt like a man lying on the operating table waiting for the chloroform.

Suddenly, the bright flame of the lamp lessened. The use that was his second nature caused him to raise the wicks and admit more draught. Even whilst his deft fingers arranged the complex burner, his ear caught a change in the external din. The shriek of the wind dropped to a thunderous growl. This was a gale, not a tempest. God be praised, the crisis had passed!

The hurricane had lasted thirty-five minutes. A similar tornado sufficed to wreck one-half of the City of St. Louis. This one, as he learnt afterwards, swept around the south of Ireland, created a tidal wave which did great damage to the Scilly Isles and the headlands of the south coast, yet spent itself somewhere in the North Sea. Dwellers in inland cities were amazed and incredulous when the newspapers spoke of its extraordinary violence. A truth is harder to swallow than a lie, all the time.

Up clattered Enid with the steaming beverage; Constance, the lantern-bearer, providing the rear-guard.

"I do believe it is blowing worse than ever," said Enid, striving desperately to be unconcerned. In reality, the angry wind was no longer able to heave the waves. With a rising tide and the gale assisting there would soon be a sea worthy of Turner in his maddest mood.

"Good gracious, dad," cried Constance, "how pale you are. And your forehead is wet. What have you been doing?"

Brand hastily mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"During some of the heavy gusts," he explained, "I was compelled to stand on the trimming stage. And—the micrometer valve required adjustment."

She eyed him narrowly. The margin of suspicion was wider.

"There is nothing else wrong?" she asked.

He approached and kissed her ear.

"Since when did my little girl begin to doubt me?" he said quietly.

Her eyes filled. Even the hint of a reproach from him was intolerable. For the life of her she could no longer control the flood of terror which well up beyond restraint.

"Forgive me, dad," she murmured, "but I thought, and I still think, that we were and are in a position of the utmost peril. I can't help knowing that it is high-water about two o'clock. It is now only a quarter to one. The worst is not over. Do you think I cannot read your dear face! Dad! If there is danger, don't send us away again."

Tears were streaming down her white cheeks. Enid holding the tray in speechless bewilderment during this outburst from her proud and self-reliant sister, set it down on the writing-desk with a crash.

"Oh dear," she wailed, "I don't want any cocoa if we're gug-gug-going to be drowned."

Certainly if Stephen Brand had imagined, two minutes earlier, that he was about to laugh long and loudly, in a genuine surrender to an uncontrollable spasm of mirth, he would have feared lest his wits were leaving him. Yet he laughed now until his vision was blurred. And the wonderful relief of it! What a tonic, after the ordeal he had endured!

It chanced, just then, that an emancipated wave embraced the granite column, hit the cornice, and deluged the lantern, its disintegrating mass striking the glass with force enough to break any ordinary window. The astounded girls could not refuse the evidence of eyes and ears. Here was the frantic sea leaping to a height of one hundred and forty feet and more, yet their father was treating the incident as the merriest joke of many a month.

No better cure for their hysteria could be contrived. Brand was obviously not acting. The hearty pulsations of laughter had restored his ruddy color. Evidently they were alarmed about nothing.

"Here, Enid, drink your parting cup," he cried at last. "Have no fear. It is only the dochan doris before many another feast."

Feeling somewhat ashamed of themselves, though smiling very wistfully, they obeyed him. He sipped his cocoa with real nonchalance. Another wave turned a somersault over the lantern. Brand's only anxiety was to blow at the steaming liquid and cool it sufficiently.

Yet was he watching them and hammering out the right course to adopt. He alone understood that, to the novice, the amazing ordeal from which the lighthouse had successfully emerged was as naught compared with the thunderous blows of the waves, the astounding reverberations of the hollow pillar, the continuous deluge of spray striking the lantern, which the infuriated sea would inflict on them.

To urge any further effort to sleep was folly. They must remain with him and be comforted.

Being reasonable girls, of fine spirit under conditions less benumbing, it was better that they should grasp the facts accurately. They would be timid, of course, just as people are timid during their first attempt to walk 'twixt rock and cataract at the Falls of Niagara, but they would have confidence in their guide and endure the surrounding pandemonium.

"Here's to you, Enid. Still we live," he cried, and drained his cup.

"I sup-pup-pose so," she stammered. "Better sup up your cocoa," said Constance. "Now I am quits with you for this afternoon."

"I'll tell you what," went on Brand, confidentially. "In that locker you will find a couple of stout pilot-coats. Put them on. As I cannot persuade you to leave me you must sit down, and it is cold in here. Moreover, for the first time in twenty-one years I will smoke on duty. I have earned a little relaxation of the law."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Constance, if not Enid, had not missed the subtle hint in his words. But she was quite normal again. She gave no sign; helped her sister into the heavy reefer, and made herself comfortable in turn.

"Neither of you will ever regret to-night's experience—when it is nicely over," he said. "You are like a couple of recruits in their first battle."

"I am sure—" began Enid.

A huge wave, containing several hundred tons of water, smote the lighthouse, and cavorted over their heads. The house that was founded upon a rock fell not, but it shook through all its iron-bound tiers, and the empty cups danced on their saucers.

Not another word could Enid utter. She was paralyzed.

"That fellow—arrived—in the nick of time—to emphasize my remarks," said Brand, lighting his pipe. "This is your baptism of fire, if I may strain a metaphor. But you are far better situated than the soldier. He gets scared out of his wits by big guns which are comparatively harmless, and when he has been well pounded for an hour or so, he advances quite blithely to meet the almost silent hail of dangerous bullets. So, you see, in his case, ignorance is bliss."

"Are we in bliss?" demanded Constance.

"You have been. The lighthouse has outlasted a hurricane such as has not visited England before in my lifetime. It is over. The wind has dropped to a No. 10 gale, and we have not lost even a bit of skin to my knowledge. Now the cannonade is beginning. Certainly, we may have the glass broken, by a rare accident, but no worse fate can befall us."

A heavy thud was followed by a deluge without. They heard the water pouring off the gallery.

Constance leaned forward, with hands on knees. Her large eyes looked into his.

"This time dad, you are not choosing your words, she said.

"I am sorry you should think that," was the reply. "I selected each phrase with singular care. Never be misled by the apparent ease of a speaker. The best impromptu is prepared beforehand."

"You dear old humbug," she cried.

Now the quiet deadliness of the scene which followed the reappearance of Enid and herself from their bed-room was manifest to her. Enid, too, was looking from one to the other in eager striving to grasp the essentials of an episode rapidly grouping its details into sequence. Brand knew that if he parried his daughters' questioning they would be on their knees by his side forthwith, and he wished to avoid any further excitement.

Please attend, both of you," he growled, with mock severity. "I am going to tell you something that will console you."

His voice was drowned by some part of the Atlantic whirling over the lantern.

"This kind of thing does not go on all the time," he continued. "Otherwise we should have five hours of spasmodic conversation. As soon as the tide rises sufficiently to gain an uninterrupted run across the reef we will have at least two hours of comparatively quiet. About four o'clock there will be a second edition for an hour or so. I suppose that any suggestion of bed—"

"Will be scouted," exclaimed Enid. "A nice pair of beauties you will be in the morning." He grumbled artfully. Not even Constance was proof against this new burthen of woe. She glanced around.

"You say that," she cried, "knowing that the nearest looking-glass is yards away."

He pointed with his pipe.

"In the second drawer of the desk you will find a heliograph. It is only a toy, but will justify me."

They ran together, and found the little circular mirror. The next wave passed unheeded. Smiling, he went up to the lamp. Even yet there was hope they might go to bed when the respite came.

After much talk of disordered hair, cracked lips, and other outrageous defects which a pretty woman mourns when divorced from her dressing-table, Constance called him.

"Here is a queer thing," she said. "Have you heard any steamer hooting?"

"No," he answered. Bending between the two of them he saw the pointer of the auriscope bore due southwest, though the last siren of which they had any knowledge sounded from the opposite direction.

He picked up a little trumpet resembling the horn of a motor-car.

"I use this for tests," he explained. Its tiny vibrator quickly brought the needle-round towards his hand.

"It is improbable in the highest degree that any steamer is near enough to affect the auriscope," he said. "On a night like this they give the coast a wide berth."

He quitted them again. The girls, having nothing better to do, watched the dial to see if any change occurred. He heard them use the small trumpet three times. Then Enid sang out:

"Oh, do come, dad. It goes back to the southwest regularly."

He joined in the watch. The needle was pointing north in obedience to the sound-waves created in the room. Suddenly, it swung round nearly half the circumference of the dial.

Continued on page 7.

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