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THE Pillar of Light

By Louis Tracy
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CHAPTER VIII. AN INTERLUDE

"Please be careful; these stairs are very steep," said Constance, swinging the lantern close to her companion's feet as they climbed down the top-most flight.
"If I fall," he assured her, "you will be the chief sufferer."
"All the more reason why you should not fall. Wait here a moment. I must have a look at the hospital."
The visiting-officer's room, which also served the purpose of a library and recreation room in normal times, now held fourteen injured persons, including two women, one of them a stewardess, and a little girl.
Most of the sufferers had received their wounds either in the saloon or by collision with the cornice of the lighthouse. The worst accident was a broken arm, the most alarming a case of cerebral concussion. Other injuries consisted, for the most part, of cuts and bruises.

Unfortunately, when the ship struck, the surgeon had gone aft to attend to an engineer whose hand was crushed as the result of some frantic lurch caused by the hurricane; hence the doctor was lost with the first batch of victims. Enid discovered that among the few stowage passengers saved was a man who had gained some experience in a field-hospital during the campaign in Cuba. Aided by the plain directions supplied with the medicine chest of the lighthouse, the ex-hospital orderly had done wonders already.
"All I want, miss," he explained, in answer to Constance's question, "is some water and some linen for bandages. The lint outfit in the chest is not half sufficient."

She vanished to return quickly with a sheet and a pair of scissors.
"Now," she said to Mr. Pyne, "if you come with me I will send you back with a pail of water."

She took him to the kitchen where Enid, aided by a sailor, pressed into service, was dispensing cocoa and biscuits. Pyne, who remained in the stairway, went off with the water and Constance's lantern. The interior of the lighthouse was utterly dark. To move without a light, and with no prior knowledge of its internal arrangements, was positively dangerous. All told, there were seven lamps of various sizes available. Brand had one, four were distributed throughout the apartments tenanted by the survivors of the wreck, two were retained for transit purposes, and the men shivering in the entrance passage had no light at all.

Constance took Enid's lantern in order to discover the whereabouts of Mr. Emmett, the first officer, the tray-carrying sailor offering to guide her to him.
"When Pyne came back he found Enid in the dark and mistook her for Constance."
"They want some more," he cried at the door.
"Some more what?" she demanded. It seemed no time for elegant diction. Her heart jumped each time the sea sprang at the rock. It seemed to be so much worse in the dark.
"Water," said he.
"Dear me. I should have thought everybody would be fully satisfied in that respect."

"Well, that's curious," he cried. "I imagined you were the other young lady. The water is needed in the hospital."
"Why didn't you say so?" she snapped, being in reality very angry with herself for her flippancy. She gave him a full pail and he quitted her.
Constance, having delivered her father's message to Mr. Emmett, was greeted with a tart question when she re-entered the kitchen:
"Why on earth didn't you tell me that young man was attending to the injured people? Is he a doctor?"
"I think not. What happened?"
"He came for a second supply of water and nearly bit my head off."
"Oh, Enid, am I sure he did not mean anything. Didn't you recognize him? It was he who climbed the mast and flung the rope to us."
"There!" said Enid, "I've gone and done it. Honestly, you know, it was I who was rude. He will think me a perfect cat."

"That isn't what people are saying," exclaimed Mr. Pyne, whose approach was denuded by the outer noise.
"There's a kind of general idea floating round that this locality is an annex of heaven, with ministering angels in attendance."
In the half light of the tiny lamps he could see Enid's scarlet face. There was a moment's silence, and this very self-possessed youth spoke again.
"The nice things we all have to tell you will keep," he said, "would you mind letting me know in which rooms you have located the ladies?"
Constance, as major domo, gave the information asked for.
"They are in the two bedrooms overhead. Poor things! I am at my wits' end to know how to get their clothing dried. You see, Mr. Pyne, my sister and I have no spare clothes here. We only came to the rock this afternoon, by the merest chance."
"That is just what was troubling me," he answered. "I am sort of interested in one of them."
"Oh," said Constance, "I do wish I could help. But, indeed, my own skirts are wringing wet."
"From what I can make out, then, my prospective step-aunt will catch a

very bad cold."
The queer phrase puzzled the girls, but Constance, rarely for her, jumped at a conclusion.
"Your prospective step-aunt. You mean, perhaps, your fiance's aunt?" she suggested.
"I don't know the lady. No, ma'am. I was right first time. Mrs. Vansittart is going to marry my uncle, so I keep an eye on her stock to that extent."
"How stupid of me!" she explained, whilst a delighted giggle from Enid did not help to mend matters. So Constance became very stately.
"I will ask Mrs. Vansittart to come out and speak to you," she began.
"No, no!" I don't wish that. You might tell her I am all right. That is the limit. And—may I make a suggestion?"
"Pray do."
"It will help considerably if the women-folk take it in turn to get into the beds or bunks. Then, some of their linen could be dried at the stove. I will take charge of that part of the business, if I may. Otherwise, some of them will die."

The girls agreed that this was a capital idea. Constance went upstairs. In the first room she inquired:
"Is Mrs. Vansittart here?"
"Yes," said a sweet but rather querulous voice.
A lady, who had already appropriated the lower bunk, raised herself on an elbow.
The little apartment, like every part of the building, save the rooms reserved by Brand's directions was packed almost to suffocation. This, if harmful in one respect, was beneficial in another. The mere animal warmth of so many human beings was grateful after the freezing effect of the gale on people literally soaked to the skin.
The girl, not unmoved by curiosity, held the light so that it illumined Mrs. Vansittart. A woman of forty, no matter how good-looking and well-preserved she may be, is in a sorry plight under such conditions. Constance saw a beautiful face, deathly white and haggard, yet animated and clearly of noble birth, the nose and chin those of a Greek statue. Just now there were deep lines across the base of the high forehead. The thin lips, allied to a transient hawk-like gleam in the prominent eyes, gave a momentary glimpse of a harsh, perhaps cruel disposition. A charming smile promptly dispelled this fleeting impression. Instantly Constance was aware of having seen Mrs. Vansittart before. So vivid was the fanciful idea that she became tongue-tied.

"Do you want me?" asked the stranger, with a new interest, and still smiling. Constance found herself wondering if the smile were not cultivated to hide that faintly caught suggestion of the bird of prey. But the question restored her mental poise.
"Only to say that Mr. Pyne—" she began.
"Charlie! Is he saved?"
Mrs. Vansittart certainly had the faculty of betraying intense interest. The girl attributed the nervous start, the quick color which tinged the white cheeks, to the natural anxiety of a woman who stood in such approximate degree of kin to the young American.
"Oh, yes," said the girl, with ready sympathy. "Don't you know that all of you owe your lives to his daring? He asked me to—say he was all right, and—that he hoped you were not utterly collapsed."

The addendum was a kindly one. No doubt, Mr. Pyne had meant her to convey such a message. Mrs. Vansittart, it was evident, had received a shock. Perhaps she was a timorous, shrinking woman, averse to the sudden stare of others.
"I know nothing," she murmured. "It was all so horrible. Oh, God! shall I ever forget that scene in the saloon. How the people fought. They were not human. They were tigers, fierce tigers, with the howls and the baleful eyes of wild beasts."
This outburst was as unexpected as her staccato question. Constance bent over her, and placed a gentle hand on her forehead.
"You must try to forget all that," she said, soothingly. "Indeed, it must have been very terrible. It was dreadful enough for us, looking down at things through a mist of foam. For you—But there! You are one of the few who escaped. That is everything. God has been very good to you!"

She was stooping low and holding the lantern in her left hand.
Suddenly, Mrs. Vansittart's eyes gleamed again with that lambent light so oddly at variance with her smile. The slight flush of excitement yielded to a ghostly pallor. With surprising energy she caught the girl's arm.
"Who are you?" she whispered.
"My father, the lighthouse-keeper," said Constance. "I am here quite by chance."
"But your name! What is your name?"
"Constance Brand."
"Brand, did you say? And your father's name?"
"Stephen Brand. Really, Mrs. Vansittart, you must try to compose yourself. You are over-wrought, and—"
She was about to say "feverish," indeed, that was a mild word. The strange glare in Mrs. Vansittart's eyes amazed her. She shrank away but lingered for an instant. With a deep sigh, the lady sank back on the pillow and fainted.

Constance was then frightened beyond question. She feared that the seizure might be a serious one, under the circumstances. To her great relief, another woman, who could not help overhearing the conversation and witnessing its sequel, came to the rescue.
"Don't be alarmed," she said. "Mrs. Vansittart is very highly strung. She fainted in the saloon. She does not realize that Mr. Pyne not only saved her, but nearly every woman here, when the door was broken open. Now, don't you worry, my dear, I will look after her. You have a great deal to do, I am sure."

Constance realized that the advice was good. She could not attend to one and neglect many.
Telling the women of the plan to dry their under-clothing in sections, she asked them to help her by arranging matters so that their garments could be divided into lots. Then she went to the second bedroom and made

the same suggestion. The case of the sufferers in the hospital required more drastic measures. The little girl she stripped with her own hands and clothed her in one of Brand's flannel shirts and a commandeered reefer jacket.

Two of Brand's spare suits and a couple of blankets enabled the two injured women, who were able to walk, to get rid of their wet garments in the crowded room beneath, and the lockers of Jackson and Bates made it possible for the men who most needed attention to be made comfortable by the invaluable hospital orderly.

Constance was kept busy flying up and down to the kitchen, whilst Enid, having met all immediate demands in the matter of a hot beverage and something to eat, supplemented her labors.
Pyne worked like a Trojan. As each pile of sodden garments was delivered to him he squeezed out as much water as possible with his hands and then applied himself to the task of baking them dry. He did this, too, in a very efficient way, speedily converting the kitchen into a miniature Turkish bath. At the end of an hour, he had succeeded so well that more than one-half of the females were supplied with tolerably dry and warm under-clothing. With their heavier garments, of course, nothing could be done.

Once, on the stairs, Enid detained Constance for a moment's chat.
"Mrs. Vansittart is odd," she said.
Constance, so taken up was she with many errands, had forgotten the lady.
"How thoughtless of me," she cried. "Is she better?"
"Yes. But when I went in just now to give her her clothes, she said to me: 'Are you the sister of the other—of Constance Brand?' It was no time for explanations, so I just said 'Yes.' She gave me such a queer look, and then smiled quite pleasantly, apologizing for troubling me."
Constance laughed.
"Perhaps she knew dad years ago," she said.

"What do you think Mr. Pyne said about her?"
"How can I tell? Did you speak of her to him?"
"I told him she had fainted when you delivered his message. He said: 'Guess she can faint as easy as I can fall off a house.' Isn't he funny?"
"I think he is splendid," said Constance.

The wreck was now wholly demolished. The first big wave of the retreating tide enveloped the lighthouse and smote it with thunderous silence. Screams came from the women's quarters.
"Go, Enid," said Constance. "Tell them they have nothing to fear. They must expect these things to happen for nearly two hours. Tell them what dad said. Twenty-five years, you know."
"Brave hearts! What infinite penetration inspired the man who first said 'Noblesse oblige!'"
Constance looked in at the kitchen. Pyne loomed through a fog of steam.
"Pay no heed to these—she was interrupted by another mighty thump and cataract roar—"these blows of Thor's hammer," she cried.
"Play me for an anvil," he returned. She descended to the depths, to reassure the men. Talking with shrill cheerfulness at each doorway was easy. It helped her to go down, down, feeling stone and iron trembling as every surge was hurled many feet above her head. At last, she stood on the lowest floor. Beneath her feet was naught but granite and iron bars. Here was solidity. How grateful to know of this firm base, rooted in the very world. Her heart leaped to her mouth, but not with fear. She was proud of the lighthouse, strong in the knowledge of its majestic strength.

Nevertheless, in this place, the source of her own sense of security, she found uneasiness among the men. They were all sailors in this lowest habitable region. Their pre-conceived ideas had been rudely reversed. The ship, the noble structure which defied the storm by yielding to its utmost fury, had for them no terrors. But the stark pillar which linched from no assault bewildered them. It was impossible to believe that it could withstand the strain. Ha! Listen to that. The battering-ram of ocean applied to a thin shaft of stone. Surely it must be pounded into fragments.
Said one, with indefinite bellow amidst the black turmoil: "I can't stand this, mates."
"Up aloft for me!" cried another.
"Let's die with our eyes open, anyhow," chimed in a third.

But a light flashed in the rolling orbs of the man who was already on the stairs. Astonished, he drew back. Constance stood in their midst, a mere girl, radiant, smilingly unconcerned, addressing them in calm words, broken only by the fitful noises.
"Sorry your quarters—so very unpleasant. Only last a-couple of hours. Twenty-five years—far worse gales. Want any more cocoa?"
"Thank you kindly, miss, we're quite comfortable." This from the man who wished to die with his eyes open.
"Please, miss, may we smoke?" said he who couldn't stand it.
Constance hesitated. Blightly unconscious that a whiff of mutiny had swept through the storm-tossed fold, she pondered the problem. She saw no harm in it.
"Yes," she said. "Smoke by all means. I will ask my father, and if it should be dangerous I will come back and let you know. In a few hours it will be daylight, and if the sea falls he will come and open the door."
By sheer inspiration she had uttered the formula destined to annihilate the necromantic bluster of the hammering waves. Open the door! So this ponderous racket was a mere tidal trick, a booby, which each passing minute would expose more thoroughly.

"All right, miss, an' Gaud bless yer," growled one who had not spoken hitherto. There was a chorus of approval. Constance gave a little gulp. The cultured and delicate lady lying in the bunk above had not spoken so. "Indeed," she gasped. "God has blessed some of us this night."
Then she fled, further utterance failing her.

Nearer the sky, Brand tended the lamp and discussed matters with chief officer Emmett. The sailor,

Continued on page 7.

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