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# THE Pillar of Light

By Louis Tracy

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CHAPTER I.

FLOTSAM.

All night long the great bell of the lighthouse, slung to a stout beam projecting seaward beneath the outer platform, had tolled its warning through the fog. The monotonous ticking of the clockwork attachment that governed it, the sharp and livelier click of the occulting hood's machinery, were the only sounds which alternated with its deep boom. The tremendous cleave sent a thrill through the giant column itself and pealed away into the murky void with a tremolo of profound diminations.

Overhead, the magnificent lantern, its eight rings of flame burning at full pressure, illumined the drifting vapor with an intensity that seemed to be born of the sturdy granite pillar of which it was the fitting diadem. Hard and strong externally as the lantern was, within it stood, replete with burnished steel and polished brass, great cylinders and powerful pumps—the lighthouse thrust its glowing torch beyond the reach of the most daring wave. Cold, clear, defiant it looked. Yet its supercilious eye swept to pierce the very heart of the fog, and the furnace-white glare, concentrated ten thousand-fold by the encircling hive of the dioptric lens, flung far into the gloom a silvery cloak of moon-like radiance.

At last an irresistible ally sprang to the assistance of the unconquerable light. About the close of the middle watch a gentle breeze from the Atlantic followed the tide and swept the shivering wreath landward to the northeast, while the first beams of a June sun completed the destruction of the routed spectre.

So, once more, as on the dawn of the third day, the waters under the heaven were gathered into one place and the dry land appeared, and behold, it was good.

On the horizon, the turquoise rim of the sea lay with the sheen of folded silk against the softer canopy of the sky. Towards the west a group of islands to which drifting banks of mist cling in melting, deep pair, were etched in shadows of dreamy purple. Over the nearer sea-floor the quickly dying vapor spread a hazy pall of opal tints. Across the face of the waters glistening bands of silver in fairy lights. The silencing rays of the sun threw broadest of golden mirage and gilded all things with the dumb gladness of an English summer's day.

A man, pacing the narrow gallery beneath the lantern, halted for a moment to flood his soul again with a beauty more entrancing by the knowledge that a few brief moments would resolve it into matter and more familiar charms.

He was engaged, it is true, in the unromantic action of filling his pipe. His simple thing, beloved alike of poets and navies, at his eyes drank in the mute glory of the scene, and captive to the spell of the hour, he murmured aloud:

"Floating on waves of music and of light,  
Behold the chariot of the Fairy Queen!  
Celestial coursers paw the unyielding air;  
Their filmy pennons at her word they fur,  
And stand obedient to the reins of light."

The small door beneath the glass pane was open. The worker within, busily ceasing an eight-inch burner, ceased for an instant and popped his head out.

"Did you call me?" he inquired.

The matter-of-fact words awoke the dreamer. He turned with a pleasant smile.

"Be exact, Jim, I did call some body, but it was Aurora, Spirit of the Dawn, not a hard-bitten sailorman like you."

"Oh, that's all right, cap'n. I thought I heard you singin' out for a light."

The other man bent his head to shield a match from a puff of wind, thus concealing from his companion the gleam of amusement in his eyes. His mate sniffed the fragrant odor of the tobacco longingly, but the Elder Brethren of the Trinity maintain strict discipline, and he vanished to his task without a thought of broken rules.

He left a piece of good advice behind him.

"If I was you, cap'n, I'd turn in. You ought to be dead beat after your double spell of the last two days. I'll keep breakfast back until three bells (9.30 a.m.) and there's fresh eggs and haddock."

"Just a couple of whiffs, Jim. Then I'll go below."

than an hour she would be abreast of the Gulf Rock Light. The watcher believed—was almost certain, in fact—that she was the Princess Royal, homeward bound from New York to Southampton. From her saloon deck those enthusiasts who had risen early enough to catch a first glimpse of the English coast were already scanning the trimly rigged outlines of the Scilly Isles, and searching with their glasses for the Land's End and the Lizard.

In a few hours they would be in Southampton; that afternoon in London—London, the Mecca of the world, from which two years ago he fled with a loathing akin to terror. The big ship out there, panting and straining as if she were beginning, not ending, her ocean race of three thousand miles, was carrying eager hundreds to the pleasures of drolleries of the great city. Yet he, the man smoking and silently staring at the growing bank of smoke—a young man, too; handsome, erect, with the clean, smooth profile of the aristocrat—had turned his back on it all and sought, and found, peace here in the gaunt pillar on a lonely rock.

Strange, how differently men are constituted. And women! Bah! A hard look came into his eyes. His mouth set in a stern contempt. For a while his face bore a stately expression which would have amazed the man within the lantern, now singing lustily as he worked.

But as the harp of David ceased the elf spirit to depart from Saul, so did the music of the sea cease to soothe the lurking devil of memory which sprang upon the lighthouse-keeper with the sight of the vessel.

He smiled again, a trifle bitterly, perhaps. Behind him the singer roared gently:

"Soon we'll be in London Town,  
Sing, my lads, ye ho, ho,  
And see the King in his golden crown,  
Sing, my lads, yeo ho."

The man on the platform seemed to be aroused from a painful reverie by the jingle so curiously a prop to his thoughts. He tapped his pipe on the iron railing, and was about to enter the lantern—and so to the region of sleep—when suddenly his glance, trained to an acuteness not dreamed of by shore folk, rested on some object seemingly distant a mile or less, and drifting slowly nearer with the tide.

At this hour a two-knot current swept to the east around and over the treacherous reef whose sunken fangs were marked by the lighthouse. In calm weather, such as prevailed just then, it was difficult enough to effect a landing at the base of the rock, but this same smiling water-race became an angry raging, tearing fury when the waves were lashed into a storm.

He pocketed his pipe and stood with hands clenched on the rail, gazing intently at a white-painted ship's life-boat, with a broken mast and a sail trailing over the stern. Its color, with the sun shining on it, no less than the vaporous eddies fading down to the surface of the sea, had prevented him from seeing it earlier. Perhaps he would not have noticed it at all were it not for the flashing wings of several sea-birds which accompanied the craft in aerial escort.

Even yet a landsman would have stared insolently in that direction and declared that there was naught else in sight save the steamer, whose tall masts and two funnels were now distinctly visible. But the light-house keeper knew he was not mis-taken. Here was a boat adrift, forsaken, deserted, its contour told him that it was no local craft straying adventurously from island to mainland. Its unexpected presence, and thus strangely from ocean wilds, the broken spar and tumbled canvas, betokened an accident, perchance a tragedy.

"Jim!" he cried.

His mate, engaged in shrouding the gleaming lens with the sun's rays came at the call. He was lame—the result of a wound received in the Egyptian campaign; nevertheless, he was quick on his feet.

"What do you make of that?"

The sailor required no more than a gesture. He shaded his eyes with his right hand, a mere shipboard trick of concentrating vision and brain, for the rising sun was almost behind him.

"Ship's boat," he answered, laconically. "Collision, I expect. There's bin no blow to speak of for days. But they're gone. Knocked overboard when she was took aback by a squall. Unless them birds—"

He spoke in a species of verbal shorthand, but his meaning was clear enough, even to the sentence left unfinished. The craft was under no control. He would drift steadily into the Bay until the tide-towered, wander in an aimless circle for half an hour thereafter, and then, when the ebb restored direction and force to the current, voyage forth again to the fabled realm of Zoroastres.

For a little while he stood quite or in silence. Jim suddenly quitted his companion and came back with a glass. He poised it with the precision of a Bisleys marksman and began to speak again, jerkily:

"Stove in forward, above the water line. Wouldn't live two minutes in a sea. Somethin' lyin' in the bows. Can't make it out. And there's a couple of cormorants perched on the gun-

But she'll hold long enough for that. The other man looked around. From that elevated perch, one hundred and thirty feet above high-water mark, he could survey a vast area of sea, excepting the approaching steamer—which would fit past a mile away to the south—and a few distant brown specks which betokened a shoal of Penzance fishing-smacks making the best of the tide eastward—there was not a small craft in sight.

"I think we should try and get hold of her," he said.

Jim kept his eye glued to the telescope.

"That's worth it, cap'n. The sal'rage'll only be a pound or two, but what a merry surpris comes in use-ful, an' we might let her up to the buoy on the off chance until the relief comes or we signal a smack. But what's the good o' talkin'? We've got no boat, an' nobody'd be such a fool as to swim to her."

"That's what I had in mind."

Jim lowered the glass.

"That's the first time I've ever heard you say a d-d silly thing, Stephen Brand."

There was no wavering judgment in his voice now. He was angry, and slightly alarmed.

"Why is it so emphatically silly, Jim?"

"How d'ye know what's aboard of her? What's them fowl after? What's under that sail? What's that lyn' crumpled up forward? Dead men, maybe, if they are, she's conveyed by sharks."

"Sharks! This is not the Red Sea. I am not afraid of any odd prowler. A once—Anyhow, I am going to ask Jones."

"That is precisely what he will do, within the next minute. Now, don't be vexed, Jim. Stand by and sing out directions if needful when I am in the water. Have no fear. I am more than equal to Leander in a sea like this."

Jim, who trusted to the head-keeper's veto, awed, too, by the reference to Leander, whom he hazily associated with Captain Webb, made no rejoinder.

He focused the telescope again, gave a moment's scrutiny to the steamer, and then re-examined the boat. The stillness of the morning was solemn. Beyond the lazy splash of the sea against the Gulf Rock itself, and an occasional heavy surge as the swell revealed and instantly smothered some dark tooth of the reef, he heard no sound save the ring of Stephen Brand's boots on the iron stairs as he descended through the oil-room, the library and office, to the first bedroom, in the lower bank of which Jones' keeper and chief, recovering from a sharp attack of sciatica—

During one fearful night in the March equinox, when the fierce heat of the lamp within and the icy blast of the gale without had temporarily deranged the occulting machinery, Jones experienced an alligous watch. Not for an instant could he forego attendance on the lamp. Owing to the sleet it was necessary to keep the light at full pressure. The surplus oil, driven up from the tanks by weights weighing half a ton, must flow copiously over the burner, or the metal might yield to the fervent power of the column of flame.

The occulting hood, too, must be helped when the warning click came, or it would jam and fail to fall periodically, thus changing the character of the light, to the bewilderment and grave peril of any unhappy vessel striving against the exterior turmoil of wind and wave.

So Jones passed four hours with his head and eyes fixed on the temperature of a Turkish bath and the lower part of his body chilled to the bone.

He thought nothing of it at the time. This was duty. But at intervals, throughout the rest of his life, the seething nerves would remind him of that lonely watch, the morning when he convalesced after a painful immobility of two days.

Watching the boat, Jim centered her in the telescopic field, and looked anxiously for a sharp arrow-shaped ripple on the surface of the sea. The breeze which had languished the day now kissed the smiling water into dimples, and his keen sight was perplexed by the myriad wavelets.

Each minute the condition of affairs on the boat became more defined. Beneath some canvas ranged along the starboard side he could see several tins, such as contain biscuits and compressed beef. The shapeless mass in the bows puzzled him. It was partly covered with broken planks from the damaged portion of the upper works, and it might be a jib-sail fallen there when the mast broke. The birds were busy and excited. He did not like that.

Nearly half an hour passed. The Princess Royal, a fine vessel of yacht-like proportions, appearing for the afternoon train, was about eight miles away, south-west by west. According to present indications steamer and derelict would be abreast of the Gulf Rock Light simultaneously, but the big-ship, of course, would give a wide berth to a rock-strewn shoal.

At last the lighthouse-keeper heard ascending footsteps. This was not Stephen Brand, but Jones, Jim, whose rare irritated moods found safety in stolid silence, neither spoke nor looked around when his chief joined him, binoculars in hand.

Jones, a man of whitewash, polish, and rigid adherence to framed rules, found the boat instantly, and recapitulated Jim's inventory, eliciting grunts of agreement as each item was ticked off.

A clang of metal beneath caught their ears—the opening of the stout doors, forty feet above high-water mark, from which a series of iron rungs, sunk into the granite wall, led to the rocky base.

Brand's goal was swim out. It's hardly worth while signifying to the Land's End," commented Jones.

No answer. Jim leaped well over and saw their associate, stripped to his underclothing, with a leather belt supporting a sheath-knife slung across his shoulders, climbing down the ladder.

This taciturnity surprised Jones, for Jim was the cheeriest nurse who ever brought a sufferer a pike of soup.

"It's nothing for a good swimmer, is it?" was the anxious question.

"No, it's no distance to speak of. 'An' the sea's like a mill-pond." "Don't you think he ought to try it? Every fine morning he has a dip."

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