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THE Pillar of Light

By Louis Tracy

Copyright by McLeod & Allen. 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 the sharp and livelier click of the occulting hood's machinery, were the only sounds which alternated, with its deep boom. The tremendous clang sent a thrill through the giant column itself and pealed away into the misty void with a tremolo of profound diminutions.

Overhead, the magnificent lantern, its eight-ringed circle 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 everlasting rock on which it stood, the lantern's 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, whilst 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 clung in melting despair, were etched in shadow of dreamy purple. Over the nearer sea-floor the quickly dying vapor spread a hazy pall of opal tints. Across the face of the sea's glittering bands, a divered in fairy lights. The six-tinted rays of the sun threw broadcast a golden mirage and gilded all things with the dumb gladness of an English summer's day.

A man, peering the narrow gallery beneath the lantern, halted for a moment to flood his soul afresh with a beauty made entrancing by the knowledge that a few brief moments would resolve it into maturer and more familiar scenes.

He was engaged, it is true, in the unromantic action of filling his pipe, a simple thing, beloved alike of poets and navies; yet his eyes drank in the murky 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 couriers paw the unyielding air; Their filmy pennons at her word they curl, And stop 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 of the dreamer. He turned with a pleasant smile. "To be exact, Jim, I did hail somebody, but it was Aurora, Spirit of the Dawn, not a hard-bitten sailor man like you."

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 scaping the trimly rugged 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 a droll life on 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 handsome 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 steely expression which would have amazed the man within the lantern, now singing lustily as he worked.

But as the lark of David caused the evil spirit to depart from Saul, so did the music of the morning chase away 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 stinger roared gently:

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

The man on the platform seemed to be aroused from a dream by the single so curiously a propos 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, beneath—when suddenly his glance, trained to the eastward, 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 awful, 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 irresolutely in that direction and declared that there was naught else in sight save the steamer, whose tall masts and two black funnels were now distinctly visible. But the light house keeper knew he was not mistaken. Here was a boat adrift, forlorn, deserted, and, as it were, a stranger to the island, straying adventurously from island to mainland. Its unexpected presence, waited so strangely from ocean wilds, the bronzed spar and tumbled canvas, betokened an accident, a perchance a tragedy.

"Jim!" he cried. His mate, engaged in shrouding the gleaming lenses from 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 strain, for the rising sun was almost behind him. "Ship's boat," he answered, laconically. "Collision, I expect. There's his bow to speak of for days. But they're gone. Knocked overboard when she was too slack 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. She would drift steadily into the Bay until the bay was reached, 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 Lyonsese.

For a little while they stood together in silence. Jim suddenly quitted his companion and came back with a glass. He poised it with the precision of a Blaisy 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"

What she'll pass within two hundred yards on her present course, and the tide'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 constant fishing-smacks—making the best of the tide eastward—there was not a sail 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 salvage'll only be a pound or two, not what an axry survin comes in use, an' we might tie her up to the buoy on the off chance until the reg'lar comes or we signal a smack. But what's the good of talkin'? We've got no boat, an' nobody'd be such a fool as to swim to her."

"That is 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 Strange, now 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 steely expression which would have amazed the man within the lantern, now singing lustily as he worked.

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[To be continued.]