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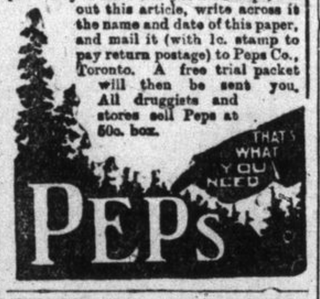

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The self-satisfied man would be more congenial if he did not want to tell others of it.

Most young stepmothers step too high.

THE Pillar of Light

By Louis Tracy

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At last his iron will predominated. The knowledge that the path of duty lay straight before him cheered his tortured soul. No man could say he erred in trying to save his children. That was a trust as solemn as any conferred by the Elder Brethren of the Trinity.

He placed a hand on Pyne's shoulder, for this youngster had become dear to him.

"Had I a son," he said, "I should wish him to be like you. Let us strive to forget the evils that threaten us. Brooding is useless. If need be, you will take charge of the lower deck. There is starvation allowance for three more days at the worst. But I hate the thought of starting the new scale to-morrow."

"It may not be necessary."

"Candidly, I fear it will. I know the Cornish coast too well. When bad weather sets in from the southwest at this season it holds for a week at the lowest computation."

"Is there no other way? Can nothing be done out there?"

"Able men, the best of sailors, the most experienced of engineers have striven for half a century to devise some means of storm communication with a rock lighhouse placed as this is. They have failed. There is none."

"That's good," cried Pyne quite pleasantly. "Where is your pouch? I feel like a smoke. If I hadn't fired that question at you I should have wasted a lot of time in hard thinking."

Brand had to scheme that night to reach the store-room unobserved. The Falcon, steaming valiantly to her observation post near the buoy, aided him considerably. He permitted the night watch to gather in the service-room whilst he supplied the men with tobacco, and stationed the officer on the gallery to observe the trawler in case she showed any signal lights.

Since the attempt on the lock Constance gave the key to her father after each visit. For the rest, the inmates of the pillar were sunk in the lethargy of unsatisfied hunger. Constance and Enid, utterly worn out with fatigue, were sound asleep in the kitchen, and the tears coursed down the man's face as he acted the part of a thief in securing the measured allowance of flour and bacon for one meal. The diet of one hungry meal for eighty-one people gave twenty-seven hungry meals for three. He ought to have taken more, but he set his teeth and refused the ungrateful task.

It is oft-times easy for a man to decide upon a set course, but hard to follow it.

"A week!" he murmured. "Perhaps ten days! That is all. Pray Heaven I may not go mad before they die!"

Pyne, watching the light, knew that Brand had succeeded. The Falcon went; gradually the watch dispersed.

"Where is the hoard?" asked Pyne, making believe that they were playing some comedy.

"Hidden in the kitchen lockers. I could obtain only distilled water. You must persuade the girls in the morning that something went wrong with the apparatus."

As opportunity offered, Brand transferred the tins to the lockers of the service-room. Pyne, who missed nothing, shook his head when it became evident that the last consignment was safely stored away.

"Not much there," he commented.

"I will take no more!" was the fierce cry.

"You ought to."

"I refuse I tell you! Don't torture me further."

"Any chance of a row in the morning? The purser and Mr. Emmett mount guard when the store-room is opened."

"I acted my role well. I built up the vacancies with empty tins."

"My sakes!" cried Pyne pityingly, "you deserve to win through."

"I think my heart will break," muttered Brand. "But look! The lamp! It needs adjusting."

Indeed, a fresh gale seemed to be springing up. The wind-vane having gone, the index was useless. It was not until a burst of spray drenched the lantern that Brand knew of a change taking place. The wind was backing round towards the north.

The barometer fell slightly. It portended either more wind and dry weather, or less wind accompanied by rain. Who could tell what would happen? Fair or foul, hurricane or calm, all things seemed to be the ungovernable blundering of blind chance.

When the rock was left in peace after the fall of the tide, Pyne promised to keep the light in order if Brand would endeavor to sleep until day-break. Rest was essential to him. He would assuredly break down under the strain if the tension were too long maintained, and a time was coming when he would need all his strength, mental and physical.

"Here have I been snoozing in odd corners ever since I came aboard," urged the American, "and I have nothing to do but starve quietly. It's ridiculous. My funeral is dated; yours isn't. You can't be on deck all the time, you know. Now, just curl up and count sheep jumping over a wall or any old game of the sort until your eyes close of their own accord."

Brand yielded. He lay on the hard boards, with a chair cushion for pillow; all the rugs rescued by Constance were now needed in the hospital. In less than a minute he was sound asleep.

"That was a close call," mused Pyne. "In another hour he would have cracked up. He's a wonder, anyhow."

The lighthouse-keeper slept until long after daybreak. Pyne refused to allow anyone to disturb him.

Soon after seven o'clock the watch reported that two vessels were approaching from the Bay. One was the Falcon, and the sailors soon made out that the other was the Trinity tender from Plymouth.

When they were both nearing the buoy, Brand was aroused.

It was evident that the brief rest had cleared his brain and restored his self-confidence. Instantly he took up the thread of events, and his first words showed how pleased he was that someone of authority in the lighthouse service should be in active communication with him.

Through his glasses he distinguished Stanhope on board the Trinity steamer, standing by the side of the inspecting-officer of the South-Coast lights. Other officials were there but near Stanhope was a tall elderly man, unknown, and certainly a stranger in Penzance.

The Falcon was now chartered by press-men, so the civilian on the official boat was evidently a person of consequence. Indeed, Brand imagined long before Pyne was able to verify the impression, that the newcomer was Mr. Cyrus J. Traill, whom he had failed to notice in the poor light of the previous evening.

He knew quite well that the experienced chief of the lighthouse service would appreciate fully the disabilities under which he labored, with eighty-one mouths to feed from a stock already far below the three months' maximum.

The first telegraphed question betrayed the prevalent anxiety.

"Hope all is well?"

What was he to say? Was it not best to speak boldly and let the men know the truth, not alone as to their present desperate plight but revealing the measures he had devised for the protection of the light? He could not make up his mind to launch out into a full explanation that instant.

So he signalled:

"Everyone alive, but many cases of grave collapse."

Stanhope was again the signaler—evidently he had arranged matters with the Admiral at Portsmouth—so Brand expected the prompt reply:

"How are Constance and Enid?"

"Quite well and cheerful."

The tall man near Stanhope bent closer.

"Are Mrs. Vansittart and Pyne all right?"

Brand assumed that the lady was in no worse condition than others. Constance, telling him the state of the sick during a hasty visit, had not mentioned her name.

So he sent the needed assurance, and went on forlornly:

"Suppose no effort can be made to open communication?"

To his great surprise the answer came:

"We are constructing a raft. When the tide falls this afternoon we will try what can be done."

Ah, how glad he was that he had not obeyed his earlier impulse, and horrified the anxious rescuers by a prophecy of lingering death for many, with the prelude, perchance, of murderous excesses committed by men on the verge of madness. If that story had to be told he would not flinch, but it was a grateful thing that the hour of its telling might at least be deferred.

A long message followed, a string of loving words from relatives ashore to those known to be imprisoned on the rock. During the merely perfunctory reading off of the signals his active mind was canvassing the probabilities of success or failure for the venture of the afternoon. It was high-water about three o'clock, and, in his judgment, with the wind in its present quarter, about northwest by west, the cross seas which would sweep the reef and engulf the lighthouse at half-tide would render it wildly impossible for any raft ever built by man's hands to live in the immediate vicinity of the rock.

However, the issue lay with others now. He knew that they would do all that brave men would dare. He was tempted to make known the inspiring news to all hands, but refrained, because he feared ultimate failure. Beneath his feet was a human volcano. Stirred too deeply, it might become active and dangerous.

So the apathetic multitude in his charge, hungrily awaiting a scanty morsel of food which only provoked what it failed to gratify, must rest content with the long statement written out by the purser and read by him at the door of each room.

Pyne took to Mrs. Vansittart the news of his uncle's presence on the steamer.

"If you would like to see him," he said, "I have no doubt Mr. Brand will let you stand on the gallery for a little while."

She declined, excusing herself on the ground of weakness.

"In this high wind," she said, "it will be very cold out there, and any further exposure would make me very ill."

"That's true enough," he agreed, though he wondered why she raised no question concerning the message she wished him to convey to Mr. Traill.

Had she forgotten the urgency of her words over night? He had carried her instructions quite faithfully to Brand and the latter smiled at the fantasy.

"Time enough to think of such things when we are assured of the lady's departure," he said, and they left it at that.

Thinking to interest her, Pyne told her of the crowd on the Falcon.

"Mostly reporters, Brand thinks," he said. "What a story they will build up in the New York papers. It will be more fun than a box of monkeys to get hold of this week's news and read all the flapdoodle they are printing."

But Mrs. Vansittart was not to be roused from her melancholy. She dreaded the least physical suffering. Privation was a new thing in her life. To-day she was inert, timid, a woman who cowered away from the door and was obviously anxious that he should leave her to the quiet misery of the packed bedroom.

As the day passed, a wearisome iteration of all that had gone before, a new feature in the relations of the crowded community made itself disagreeably apparent. Men drew apart from each other, singly, or in small groups. An inconsolable gloom settled on the women. By some means, the knowledge spread that they might all starve to death in the heart of this cold dungeon. They began to loathe it, to upbraid its steadfastness with spoken curses or unrestrained tears. The sanctuary of one day was becoming the tomb of the next. No longer was there competition to look at land or sea from the open windows. Everywhere was settling down a pall of blank, horrible silence and suspicion.

Even Constance yielded to the common terror once when the men of the watch escorted the bearer of a trayload of provisions to the occupants of the coal-cellar.

"Enid," she whispered, "did you see the light in their eyes? What is it? Does hunger look that way?"

"It must be so, yet it is almost unbelievable. They are far removed from real starvation."

"One would think so. But it is so hard to realize things beforehand. And they have nothing to do. They are brooding all the time. We are slaves of our imagination. Many a sick person is allowed to eat far less than these men have been given, and the deprivation is not felt at all."

"What will become of us, Constance, if we are detained here for many days?"

"Dear one, do not ask me. We must not think of such things."

"But dad is thinking of them. I watched his face when I took him a scrap of food just now, and—"

"Hush, dear. Let us pray—and hope."

There was a clatter of feet down the iron stairs. The men of the watch were hustling to unbar the iron door. A solidly built, circular raft had been lowered from the Trinity tender.

An assistant-keeper, wearing a cork jacket, with a rope about his waist, was clinging to a stumpy mast in the centre. Two stout guide-ropes were manipulated from the deck of the vessel, and the flat, unweildy mass of timber was slowly drifting nearer the lighthouse with the tide.

The door of the column opened towards the east, so the wind, with its pelting sheets of spray, was almost in the opposite quarter, and the stout granite shaft itself afforded some degree of protection for the entrance.

The scheme signaled from the steamer was a good one. None but a lunatic would endeavor to approach the rock itself, but there was a chance that the raft might be made to drift near enough to the door to permit a grapnel to be thrown across the rope held by the gallant volunteer on the raft.

It was his duty to attach the two ropes and thus render it possible for a stronger line to be drawn from the vessel to the pillar. There was no other way. The lighthouse did not possess a rope of sufficient length to be drawn back by the raft without the intervention of some human agency.

This was precisely the puny, half-despairing dodge that the reef loved to play with. Cat-like, it permitted the queer flat-bottomed craft to approach almost within hail. Then it shot forth a claw of furious surf, the heavy raft was picked up as if it were a floating feather, turned clean over, and flung many fathoms out to sea, whilst both of its guiding cables were snapped with contemptuous ease.

The assistant-keeper, kept afloat by his jacket, was hauled, half drowned, back through the choking froth, whilst the wave which overwhelmed the raft curled up a spiteful tongue and almost succeeded in dragging out several of the men stationed in the doorway.

With a clang the iron shutter was rushed into its place, and when the sailor was rescued the Trinity boat steamed away to try and secure the raft.

So joyous hope gave way once more to dark foreboding, and the only comfort was the faint one to be extracted from the parting signal:

"Will try again next tide."

(To be continued.)

Being able to not sing is often a great relief to the company present.

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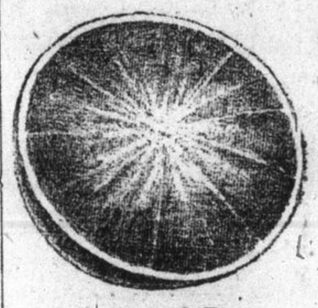

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