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A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER I.

Suspense—And A Gathering Storm.

"What puzzles me," said Captain Curzon irritably, "is where the man gets the stuff from. I keep the key of the medicine chest in my pocket, and, this being a temperance ship, there's not a drop of grog aboard beyond the medical comforts. And yet that steward's drunk again!"

Mr. Steadman, chief mate of the Zoroaster, looked thoughtfully into the eye of the wind. He did most things thoughtfully, being by nature a slow moving man, except—a notable exception—when the ship was reeling madly before a volleying eastern gale—just such a gale as was now brewing up, if the lowered barometer and the steely uncertainty of the Indian Ocean sky were to be regarded as signs and tokens. Then the ponderous figure became imbued with almost monkey-like agility, and the highest yards of the swaying, restless ship were no strangers to his dominant presence, as the crew, urged on by his biting voice, grappled with frozen, adamantine canvas that stood out like sheets of steel and set their most strenuous efforts at naught. Then, wherever the mate was, there was full life and great activity, and the crew of the Zoroaster knew that his hand would follow the harshly-spoken word as thunder follows the lightning flash, did they but give cause for such extreme measures. Now, however, the mate was merely thoughtful. "It's bad for a woman when the stoward's drunk," he remarked, and he weighed each word carefully. "Besides, there's going to be a snorter before night. Don't think much of carrying women myself aboard ship. Not that they're in the way—it isn't that, sir; but they've got too much to put up with."

"My wife will have more than her share," growled Curzon. "If it hadn't been for that infernal calm there on the Line, and if the South-east Trades had been anywhere but where they were—and that was right ahead—we might have managed to reach Port Pirie in time. As it is—"

"It is hard lines," repeated Mr. Steadman sympathetically. "I know how it feels for you. I've had three myself, and I'm dashed if the coming of the third wasn't worse than the first." Mr. Steadman did not refer to his third wife; he merely touched on a subject which his superior understood by inference.

"But—look at that!" grunted the skipper, who, in spite of his bare thirty years, still went under the designation of "the old man"; "it's an encouraging sight, considering what might be expected any time now."

He could not get away from the subject, and pointed with a trembling forefinger at a huddled bundle of grimy clothes and shoring humanity in the lee scuppers; Gies, the steward of the ship, was at peace with the world. Heaven only knew where he had got the means for this last and most hogtish debauch, but perhaps the locksmith in London, who filed an old key to fit the medicine chest, might have told a tale that would have shed light on the vexed question.

"I've more than half a mind to tie him in the bight of a brace and tow him astern for a couple of hours," went on Curzon. "It would serve him right. There's my wife wanting something dainty and delicate in the food line, and half-raw salt-horse and weevily biscuit is all I can offer. And we'll need all our condensed milk."

Steadman cast another glance at the weather, walked briskly aft, and spoke curtly to the man at the wheel. "Mind your steering," said he. "Don't let her get aback. These airs aren't anything to go by. What you've got to do is to keep your eyes on that—savvy?" He pointed deliberately in the murk to the west, and the man nodded.

"Ay, ay, sir. I'll attend."

"See you do, Simms. By the way, you'll have the midnight to two o'clock wheel, won't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. I might want you to keep at the helm all the watch, a bit after that, perhaps, there's no telling if it comes along as we expect, that is. So you needn't come on deck in the second dog-watch."

"Very good, sir." The man chewed on turning things over stolidly in his heavy mind. Outwardly Simms was an unprepossessing piece of humanity enough, black-browed and scowling, a born grumbler, one of the old shell-back breed, much given to long-winded discourses on the superlative merits of his last ship. It is a curious fact that with a deep-water sailor his last ship is always the best, no matter though she has been one of those hell-ships which disgrace the seas, where men live like animals and toil like

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slaves. Away from blue water Simms went in for sordid, brutal orgies; he spent his hard-earned money with almost regular extravagance; he seldom was ashore more than a week without making at least one appearance before the magistrates, and the purlieus of dock-land knew him better than more reputable haunts. At sea, when the call for action arose, he was first aloft, first to the weather reef-earring, the keenest sailor in the fore-castle, and—Mr. Steadman had this in mind—the best helmsman who ever stared blinking into a binnacle.

"Ay, that's it, is it?" ruminated the sailor, pensively watching the flapping royals and shifting the wheel with careful deliberation. "I thought some thing was afoot. Well, I pithee her, I does. About the middle watch, he says, so—the kid'll be born in a gale. Poor little mite!" And he hitched his pants, coughed a little, then cursed out loud as the sea astern grew from molten glass to furrowed beauty, and the drooping sails filled thunderously. He got the helm up just in time, and the ship swerved off as Mr. Steadman's voice volleyed along the decks: "Square the mainyard, lively, boys!"

From that moment forward the mate of the Zoroaster had other affairs to occupy his attention than the one thing that was harassing the skipper to the verge of distraction. The ship had lain three days on the glassy sea, without a single decent current of wind to wait her eastwards; her entire progress from the Downs had been a prolonged and wholly heart-breaking crawl.

Head winds and calms had beset her, the days had slipped by into weeks, the weeks into months, and still she was far from her desired haven. And down below in the cabin lay a woman, who looked with tight-ened heart-strings to the future, and cried feebly upon her God that He might help her bear the coming ordeal.

Steadman set to work with careful deliberation, marking the advance of the storm-cloud, calculating, discarding, accepting with all the weather wisdom of an old salt. Before night the ship promised to be making heavy weather of it, and it behoved him, as a skillful officer, to pay particular regard to his charge's welfare. The ship must ride smoothly through the

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storm; those hard, jarring lurches, the sickening heaves, the furious wallowings, must be minimised to the best of his ability. And, another important item, he must have the ship so well readied that there would be no need to call for the captain's advice and assistance at a critical moment.

The Zoroaster must be brought into such condition that a young and comparatively untried man—the second mate was but twenty-two—could see her through the storm, in case, which was likely, the mate should be required below. Therefore Steadman spared himself not at all, and, once the yards were squared, he made a rapid calculation in his brain. The topsail must come down, he decided, the main sail must be stowed, a reef taken in the foresail, and the fore-upper-topsail hauled down and furled.

All this was done, the ship was stripped until her masts reached upwards to the feather-covered blue of the sky in naked ugliness; and so, with a moderate breeze astern, and her sails shortened down to bare storm canvass, the Zoroaster flung her bowsprit under a sudden swell, which she threw over her forecastle in a cloud of stinging spray, and strode out upon the waste of waters with a jaunty tread.

"Mate's gone cracked," said the youngest apprentice aboard, with the air of a sea Solomon. "Whoever heard of shortening down in this sort of a breeze?"

"Shut up, kid," growled Fraser, the senior apprentice. "Don't you know what's wrong? Oh, of course, you're a kid."

"If you mean about Mrs. Curzon," began Kilkie, "I know all there is to know. She's expecting—"

"That's enough," said Fraser sternly. He worshipped the gentle woman in the cabin with the passionate worship of a clean-souled lad for the earnest woman who had guided him in straight paths by her sweet-voiced counsel. "Don't you talk so much, kid; and get those dishes washed up. Never saw anything so filthy in my

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life as those plates, thrust your tongue, maybe, Wilkie thrust the maligned member into his cheek, and winked at Joyce, who was in his watch and of equal time. Joyce, glancing first at Fraser, decided not to encourage the youngster, and buried himself in a novel as he crouched on his sea-chest reading with difficulty by the last streaks of daylight that filtered in at the ports of the dingy half-deck.

"Go along to the steward and get me some tobacco, kid," said Fraser, when the youngster had performed his appointed duties. "Tell him to give me some—"

"The steward's drunk, Fraser. I saw himself myself when I went on deck. Coiled up in the scuppers, snoring like a hog."

"By Jove!" Fraser's young voice thrilled with emotion. "And the brute knows as well as anybody. It's a cursed shame. Get out of the way, you little nuisance." He snatched his cap from the table, opened the half-deck door, vaulted over the high step, and gained the deck.

The delinquent steward had been kicked from his resting-place, and now lay stretched alongside of the chicken-coop, a blot on the day. To him Fraser addressed himself diligently, taking him by the collar of his greasy shirt and lugging him forcibly about the spray-wet planks. Finally with a thump of deep disgust, the lad planted him to windward of the coop, and was just about to leave him when the Zoroaster curysed saucily to a wave and threw a shower of spray full over the incapable domestic. He wakened with a weeping grunt, looked about him vacantly, then subsided in a pool of water.

"What's happened?" he murmured drowsily. "An avalanche! S—save th' others; lemme drown."

"You drunken sweep!" roared Fraser. "For two pins, you black-guard, I'd screw your confounded neck. Get up and hide!" His sea-boot toe added emphasis to his words, and the steward staggered to his feet, and clawed his way up the poop ladder, after which he fell into the clutches of the second mate, who had come on

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fashion. No more cabin tartish, my lad. There's going to be n' more 'dashed milk' either."

"Damn the cabin tarts!" cried Fraser, and he ran boldly forward, seized the miserable specimen of humanity, and shook him vigorously. The steward dissolved into hysterical tears, scrambled along the deck, and clawed his way up the poop ladder, after which he fell into the clutches of the second mate, who had come on

deck at four o'clock, and who looked towards as a class. Vigors kicked him down the companionway, and turned again to the helm for the ship was by this time beginning to behave unhandily.

(To be continued)

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