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BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XX.

Long Jake Throws Down The Gauntlet

(Continued)

Curzon said nothing; his lips were set grimly. He was eyeing a tall, loose-joined man, with a bad, reckless face, who wore a slouch hat on his head and an evil-looking knife in his belt. He was thinking that it would take some more heroic influence than that of the sea to make anything but a scoundrel of Long Jake the Dane. But his thoughts remained concealed behind his wide, furrowed forehead, and neither by word nor gesture did he indicate one suggestion of the matter that was troubling him.

Long Jake turned as he laid one hand on the main shrouds, prior to ascending aloft, and his bold eyes fell full on Aileen where she leaned over the pin-rail at the break of the poop. Leigh, who had just breakfasted, came on deck at this moment, and caught the horrible expression of the sailor's face. Inwardly his blood boiled at the meaning of the glance. He said at that moment that he would take especial care to drive Long Jake until his head reeled, until his work-worn soul refused to entertain such suggestions as those which were evidently just now possessing him.

"All right, sir," said the second mate to Steadman, as an indication that he had breakfasted and was now ready to take charge of the ship. The pilot had gone ashore at midnight, the English land was almost out of sight, and the ship was free to obey the guiding hands of these her lawful complement.

"West by north," said Steadman, raising himself. "I'll go and turn in, mister."

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signs and tokens; he knew that mutiny was practically unknown at sea, but—it was as well to be on the safe side. And, for the first time for over three years he found himself half afraid. Afraid of Aileen's future, that was it. He would not permit the thought to define itself, he thrust it away resolutely; but it still cropped up again and again as he opened the top drawer beneath his bunk and examined the heavy revolvers there. One was jammed in the cylinder, practically useless, the other was in good order, but the accompanying cartridges were few and old.

"Still, I expect Steadman's got his pistol, and I'll wager Leigh has, too; and Bray won't be without, although it isn't allowed for an apprentice to carry fire-arms aboard ship. I'll reckon up our available defences before very long and just give the Britishers a hint to be ready," said Curzon, as he slipped half a dozen cartridges into the pistol's breech.

Meanwhile, on deck, Aileen swung to and fro along and sang light-heartedly. Young Bray, at the wheel, listened with open ears to her cheerful song and thanked his lucky stars for Aileen, much as he despised girls on the whole. He had seen, whilst ashore in the last spell, one of his townsmen, who had joined the sea service at the same time as he did, drunk and incapable, a sodden wreck of humanity, an object of loathing to decent souls. And he reflected that, but for Aileen's intervention, he might have been in a similar plight. He beckoned to her and told her as much, shamefacedly, but still his thanks were plainly and gratefully spoken in the grateful shining of his eyes.

"I have never touched a drop since that day, Miss Curzon," he stammered. Aileen's hands flew out impulsively and gripped Bray's tar-stained fingers over the wheel-spokes.

"Well done, Bray," she said; and turning away, her song rose higher

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and more cheerful still. Yes, it was good to be at sea, good to feel the thrill and heave of the old Zoroaster, good to mingle with self-reliant men, with boys who were already men, aged by battling rather than by years. She leaned thoughtfully over the rail and watched the foaming scud overhead; her eyes shone like the Channel sea, her heart throbbled steadily, even as did the great sails overhead.

"Who put this service on here?" It was Leigh's voice, cool and commanding, somewhat haughty, maybe, and Aileen half turned to listen. She had had no opportunity of forming judgment on her champion as an officer, and Aileen was a critic as regarded the capabilities of men to command. As a friend and companion Leigh was all that could be desired; he sympathized with her, understood her frantic yearning for the sea. Beyond that she knew but little of him, and half consciously she found herself longing that he might come up to her standard. The man in whom she displayed interest must be essentially a man. And she flushed a little at the thought, for undoubtedly she felt a keen interest in Leigh.

The second mate had laid an accusing finger on some service on a brace. It was slovenly, unkempt—the orderly lay of the tarred twine was missing, gaps yawned, loose ends protruded here and there. He took out his knife and ripped the stuff away, leaving the new rope clean and bare.

"Who put this service on here?" he inquired of the Spanish boatsmen, who was passing.

"I 'tink it Long Jake," grinned the Dago, pointing to a vast, lanky figure in the main rigging. Long Jake caught his name, and an evil grin overspread his face. He had bragged in the fore-castle about the "hell-and-a-half-time" he was going to give the officers

of the Zoroaster this present voyage. And here was the first opportunity ready to his hand. He carefully hung his marlinepike to a ratline, spat on his great paws, and began to descend, growling vindictively beneath his breath. He had taken a spite against Leigh from the very first.

"Jes, I guess I did dat here service, Mister Mate," he said aggressively, thrusting a lantern jaw forward in a dogged fashion, his eyes glittering balefully.

"Then get a serving mallet along and do it again," said Leigh, as one would admit of no argument. "That piece of work would disgrace a cook's mate. Look alive now, you gardener!"

Long Jake looked anything but alive if by that command Leigh meant him to fetch implements immediately and apply himself to the incomplete work. Instead he thrust both fists into the pockets of his dungarees and, revivifying his quid with careful slowness, temporised.

His long service in ships where English is spoken had given him fluency in Leigh's mother tongue; but here and there a word was clipped, and he had never mastered the "th" sounds. He bespattered his conversations with plentiful oaths and Yankee idioms and flowers of speech, and boasted largely when in the company of men still meaner than himself that he was a "Jank, by Yames, every time."

"D'ju mean to say, Mister Mate," he said swaggeringly, "dat dot service ain't to your liking, vot? Vell, I was A.B. in der Jankee Navy, and I guess and calculate dere ain't no darned hungry second mate of a lime-juicer kin teach me mine letters in sailorising. I vos handt, reef andt steer second to none aboard dis packet ship, andt so I say to you: Do der darned yob yourself, andt be dammed!"

"Get forrard and fetch a serving mallet," said Leigh coolly, but he was a little white about the lips. "Let's

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have no slack jaw here. And if you haven't done this and your other work before eight bells you'll lose your afternoon below, see?"

"Jes, jes; ju'll lose me mine afternoon watch below, vill ju? Ju're a fine yellows, I must say. I tells ju, mister, Yake Bronson is a hard-case from de vordt go. A hard-case from Hard-case-ville. Understand? Ju'll alter your tone, mister, ven ju're complimenting Yake Bronson on his work."

Two or three of the watch on deck had clustered about the spot, and the one who could speak English was explaining to his companions what was afoot. The faces of all the spectators bore wide grins—except the face of Aileen, that is. She was half-sheltered by the mizen rigging, but she could see and hear everything. And her lips were closely compressed, her eyes shot living lightnings. She was tensed in expectancy, hoping to hear the dull thud of fist on crushed flesh at any moment. Had she been a man she would have run to the main-deck, would have swung the belligerent sail or out of the road, and kicked him to the fore-castle. But she felt her heart sink deep down in her trim boots as Leigh made no aggressive movement. It is illegal for an officer to strike a seaman as for a seaman to strike an officer aboard a merchant ship, but Aileen knew the law was occasionally stretched a good deal on this subject, and that a square stand-up fight between superior and subordinate was no uncommon thing.

Leigh was very angry. He was remembering that lustful glance at Aileen, and he glanced quickly to the poop. The girl was not in sight from where he stood, though plainly seeing, and he allowed his anger to find vent in such language as goes best at sea. He damned Long Jake's eyes to all perdition, and sought gropingly within his imagination for fresh epithets.

"Now go and get that jobdone, and don't stand palavering there, you long legged Dutch loafer. O'ye hear?"

"Jes, mister, I hears. I takes mine own blasted time, and I puts a head on ju for a start." And Jake flung forward a huge fist, shook it truculently beneath Leigh's nose, and then began leisurely to strip off his dungaree jacket.

Aileen, her breath coming quickly, left her hiding-place and stepped to the rail in full view. She hoped and prayed that Leigh would pick up the thrown-down gauntlet and give the big sailor a thorough hammering. She hated the Dane already; her woman's instinct told her something of what was his bold, roving glance towards her meant. It was a moment when she could have cried out aloud gleefully to see the red blood of the sailor run hot and fast.

Leigh stood rockingly on his feet for a full minute, his lips trembling, his eyes strangely fixed. In fancy—he was cursed with a vile imagination—he could see himself at grips

with this bullying man. He knew too much by repute of the fighting methods of these ocean outcasts, knew that a gouging thumb might rid him of an eye before he had time to get a decent blow or secure a strange hold. He had never been tested in such an imbroglio before. As a boy he had fought his way against boys, but this deadly man-to-man fighting had never happened his way. Fear rose paramount in his heart; he wince away from the threatening fist; and turned on his heel. A low mocking laugh brought him round again. Long Jake was donning his jacket, which one of the Dagoes held for him ostentatiously.

"None of that here," said Leigh huskily. "Get forrard, you men, let—his eyes rested scornfully on the braggart—"I'll have you logged for insubordination at once." And then, as soon as the words were spoken he would have withdrawn them. Nay, more than that, he was willing and ready to fling himself into the battle, to smite heavily at the sailor's sneering face. He clenched his fists and advanced a step.

"Put them up, then," he said sharply. "It was too late.

"Ju've had your chance, mister," drawled the sailor, buttoning his jacket. "Guess I know who's top dog hereabouts."

(To be continued)

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