

A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Full Force Of The Storm.

Sebastian recovered himself as Leigh reeled forward, and was running in to repeat his blow, making sure of certainty, when something flashed close beside his temple—he sprang upward with a fierce yell, clapped one hand to his forehead, dropped limply, and collapsed in a heap almost upon the man he had felled.

Aileen had seen Leigh fall, struck down by that treacherous blow from behind. Without thought, without taking aim, she had thrown forward her revolver, had pulled the trigger with a trembling finger, and Sebastian's career was ended once for all.

But the need for action was pressing. Leigh lay there extended on the deck—she saw his limbs twitch once, and said that he still lived. And seeing him there, inert and helpless, dead for her sake, she would have it, she understood many things. Leigh must not die. He was more to her than the sea, more to her than her helpless father below—she realised it now. She must have known it all her life, she said wonderingly—aye, even when he shrank back from the bully's threatening first—she had loved him then. And now, thought is swift, to some action follows so close on the heels of thought as to allow no perceptible delay. Aileen saw Leigh lie there at her feet, saw the mob of men surge round the house, fired once straight into their rage-distorted faces, and then—she had the prostrate man by the heels and was dragging him, with all her free young strength exerted to the utmost, into temporary security. She never knew how she did it—But he was hopeless, and all that re-

mained were herself and Bray—yet, why was not Bray here? She did not know that the apprentice was fouling the sea-washed scuppers with his blood, his teeth fixed in a death-bite in the throat of a dead man. "Don't hurt her!" screamed Stubbs, coming forward. "Take her alive. I'll the man who touches her!" Aileen blood boiled, and then chilled suddenly at the meaning in the man's voice.

"Stand back!" she cried fearlessly still. Someone flung something weighty through the darkness at her fair young head—she heard it strike the wooden door-frame with a dull thud, but she was unharmed. She fired again, and a yell answered the shot. Stubbs recoiled, the reek of burnt powder in his nostrils and a growing fear in his soul.

"Stand off," he raged, "stand off! Get back, I'll settle her." Aileen's lips were closely compressed now—she knew that she held but two men's lives in her hands. But one, in fact, for when the last shot was fired she must save one for herself, lest worse than death befall her. Now she understood half-heard conversations with her old sea-friends of the gone-by time—velled hints of murder and rapine in the past had days. They were seeking her, to drag her down to open shame—but they should never have her alive. Her father, too, he must be thought of, and Leigh—yes, Leigh, the man she loved with all her untutored heart. One shot to save them all! It seemed impossible. What was this?—a voice speaking as from an infinite distance? Yes, a loathsome voice, sneeringly ingratiating; Stubbs' voice. And with a swift flash of memory Aileen went back three years to a tropic night, with this man's arms about her, with his hot, passionate breath on her face, his lips crushed to hers. A mad anger brewed up in her heart at the memory—she steadied her hand unerringly.

CHAPTER XXX.

The Cry Of A Well-Loved Voice.

Not even the presence of imminent death—or worse—could still the mad beating of the girl's heart now. She realised with a thrill that the very life of the old Zoroaster depended on her single self alone. She must stave off this awful doom that threatened—by dint of her own courage and strength she must hold back that mutinous, murdering rabble until some help came. But where could help come from? She asked half the question desperately. Steadman was dead—Leigh had gasped that out, she remembered. And Leigh himself was down—not dead, thank God, not dead—yet, But he was hopeless, and all that re-

mained were herself and Bray—yet, why was not Bray here? She did not know that the apprentice was fouling the sea-washed scuppers with his blood, his teeth fixed in a death-bite in the throat of a dead man. "Don't hurt her!" screamed Stubbs, coming forward. "Take her alive. I'll the man who touches her!" Aileen blood boiled, and then chilled suddenly at the meaning in the man's voice.

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"It's all right, my lass," said Stubbs, beeringly. "Don't fret. We aren't intending to hurt ye. Just listen to reason now, lass."



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"Reason—from mutineers!" Her answer to the question for her with cunning suddenness. He dodged low and rushed in. His hand flashed up and struck the revolver from her hand—it fell to the deck and exploded there, then, as the ship heaved, darted to the scuppers out of reach. And a second later the brute's strong arms were round her waist—he was dragging her into the open, away from Leigh, away from her father. Nay, he was clapping his hand over her mouth as he had done in the past time—she remembered the old trick, and sank her sharp white teeth into his hardened flesh, shuddering horribly at the noise, swishing her strong young body of it all. But she struggled. Aileen recoiled from screaming. "Don't be let go in a hurry," she said. Aileen wondered what to do. It was one thing to shoot into a sea of devilish faces, one thing to shoot at a murdered as he delivered his sickening blow, but it was different quietly before her. She stared fixedly through the gloom, wondering, wondering. But the levelled revolver never faltered, the chill muzzle still pointed unerringly between Stubbs' eyes.

The men had fallen back, awaiting the command of the stronger mind—the mad yellings of Jake, in torture unimaginable, rang blasphemously on the thundering storm-wind. What should she do? She could not shoot the villain in cold blood. But Stubbs

bent this way, and that, writhed and kicked, tearing at the hot face above her, eye, using her nails like any fishwife, strong in the womanly instinct of self-preservation, before which all the long teachings in deportment as construed by the Misses Learoyd fled unashamed. She was a primitive woman at last, fighting for life and honour, no longer narrowed and hemmed in by convention—a tigress defending herself, her honour, against a ravening enemy. Like a jungle beast deprived of her young, she clawed and bit—reeling from side to side of the deck, stumbling here, tripping there, but always keeping on her feet as by a miracle, though the Zoroaster, in irons, coming up into the wind as the pounding seas astern swung her counter round, unmanaged, untended, reeled and lurched blindly before the gale. But she knew the struggle could not last. Her strength was failing her fast—a growing dizziness, an awful horror numbed her muscles. Yet she swung free once more, and uttered one heartrending yell. It was in vain, she thought, quite in vain, for there was none to aid; but it was her woman's instinct uttering its last protest against the impending horror.

Then she heard the roar as of many waters in her ears, saw, as in a vision, a wild, dishevelled figure reel out into the open, heard a lion-like roar of anger, the sound of a crushing blow. That last heartrending cry had penetrated deep into the slow-waking brain of the man who loved her, where he lay sprawl over the coaming of the chart-room door. None had touched him—they counted him dead already. The men had stood back to watch the issue of Stubbs' fight with the girl, they crowded round, eyes a-stare, mouths agape. Presently, when this good sport was over, they said, Stubbs would remember that he was their leader, and would bid them to further work of spoil. But Leigh had heard that frantic shriek, and had aroused as a racehorse to the kiss of the flank-riddling spur. Blindly, his head swirling, almost sightless, yet

wholly resolute, he scrambled to his feet. The iron bar was in his hand—his fingers had closed on it tenaciously. He staggered a little, unseen in the darkness, for the struggle had carried the mutineers towards the wheel. But he understood it all. The woman he loved was in the grip of the man who knew no mercy. Nay, he could hear Stubbs' grating laugh as he forced back the limp young head. He heard more—the sound of a slobbering kiss, and his madness woke to life at the sound. He was up, he was in the midst of them, the terrible bar swinging like a flail. He fought without heed to his own safety—he must get to Aileen's side, some how, somehow. Before his mad onrush men fell back appalled. Their first madness was spent; they counted opposition at an end. But here was someone very furiously at war with them, someone who feared neither steel nor iron, someone who lashed out with a terrible weapon at unprotected heads and faces—they covered back and back, seeking safety blindly.

Right through them he spun, mad with rage, striving only to kill and kill before he in his turn was killed. Again that terrible flail fell crushing-ly, and a sailor, who stumbled away, went down with a broken neck. But Stubbs had turned—the girl in his arms. He felt for his knife—fool! he had thrown it away when first he clutched Aileen. He dropped his burden and crouched for a spring, realising that death lurked in that uplifted bar, but before he could gather himself together the bar was down. Right across his face it smashed, a fearful blow. The lower jaw gave to that frightful impact as an eggshell, it was torn half away, and such a scream, as laughing fiends in hell might hear burst from his gaping throat. Then, with a second scream, he flung his arms above his head, reeled back and back, stumbled over a ring-bolt, and fell heavily. The men crowded together, a sullen-mob, beside the chattering, jarring wheel.

(To be continued)

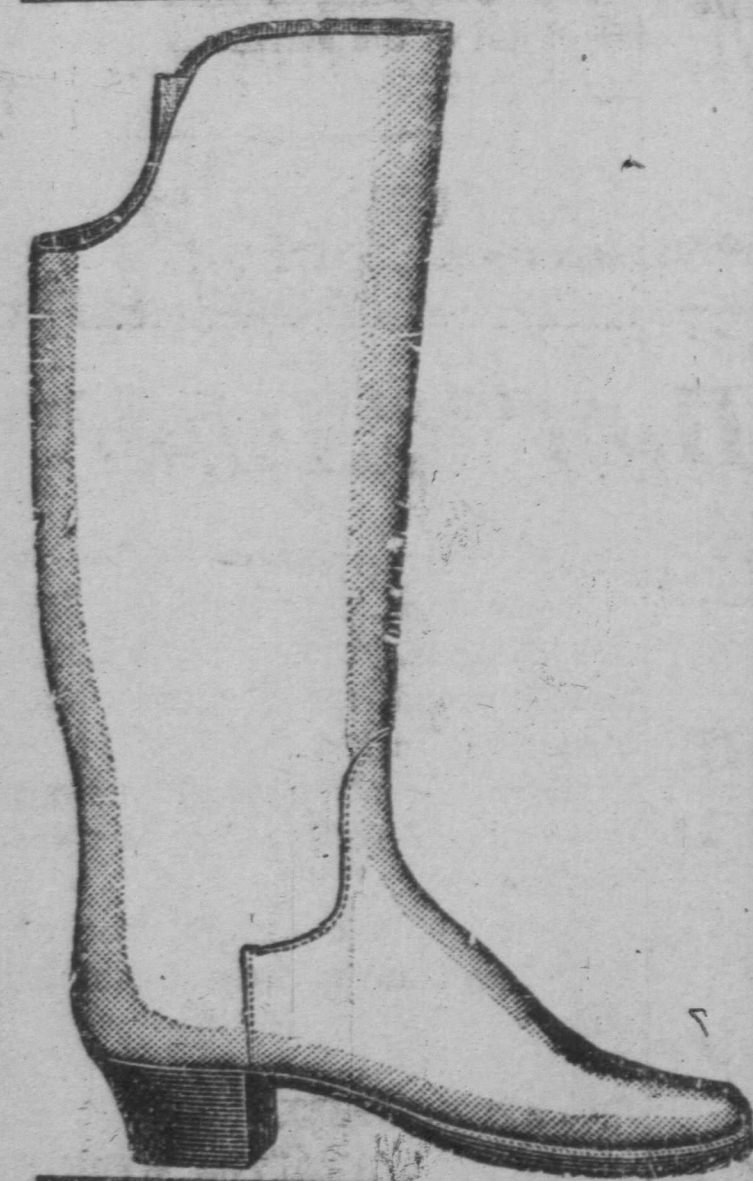
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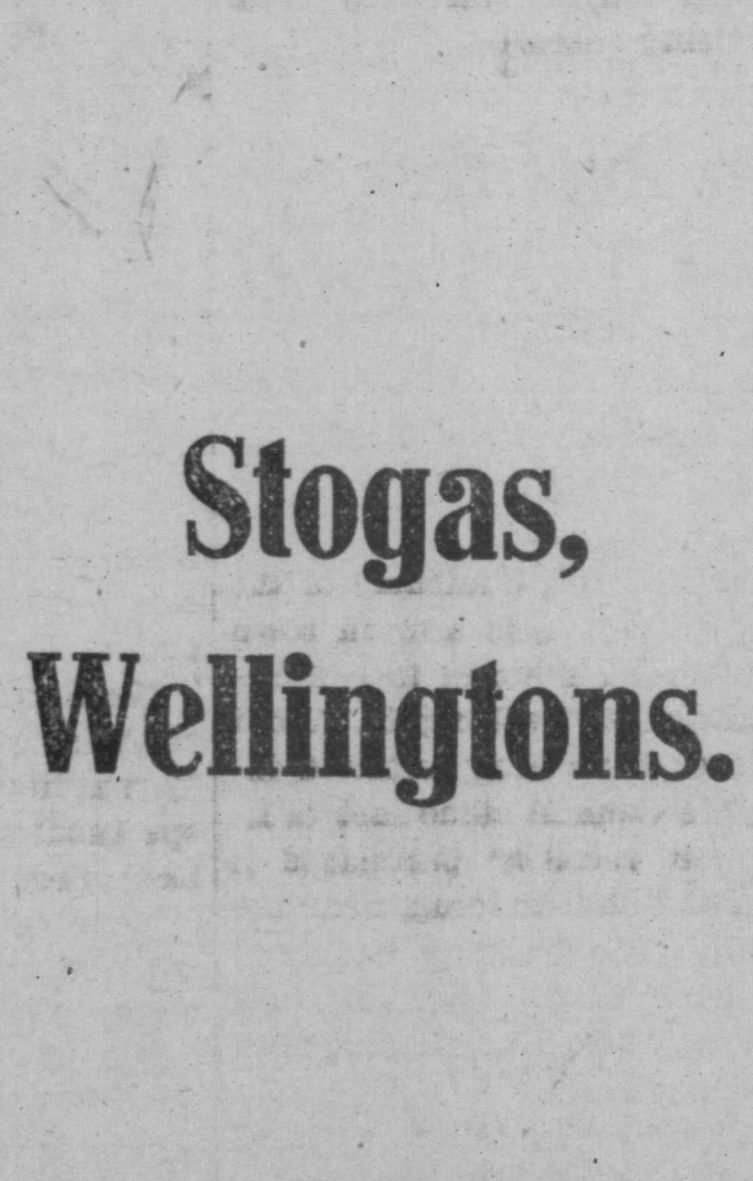
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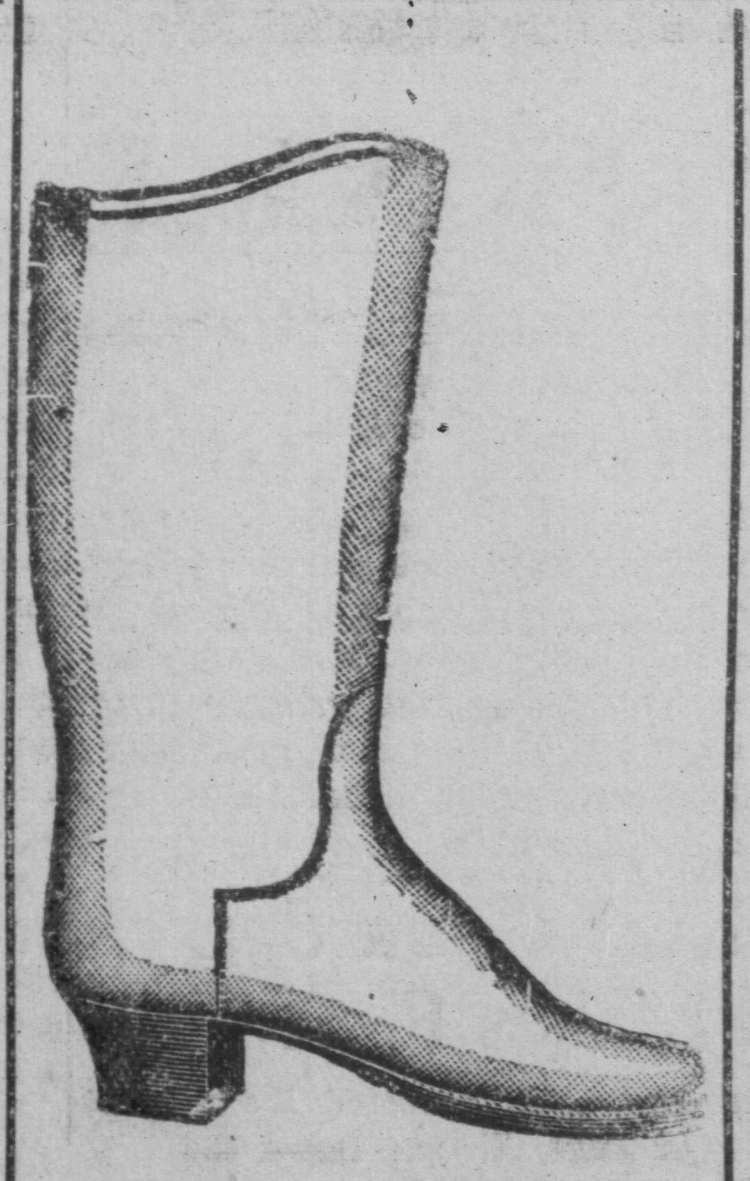
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