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## A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

### CHAPTER X.

The Call of the Sea.

(Continued)

Brought back that ring of brown, unwhipped, unshaven faces, too, stolidly staring into the middle distance, the long, tattooed arms, with the tarry hands, always half-closed as if gripping a rope; brought back the clouds of tobacco smoke, the groaning sea-song, the heave and lift of the wind-borne ship, the hissing splash of parted water beneath the onward ploughing bow. She knew it all, better than if the scene were actually before her. She was lonely and forlorn, the taste of biscuit, combined with the familiar uniform, had touched the chords of her heart, and without the sea she felt she must die.

"But it can't be done," she moaned, pressing her slim, capable hands against her brow. "I'd give almost anything for a sniff of the salt, and—it can't be done."

She began to hum a sea-chanty, and the strains of "Oh, Sally Brown," meandered through the stifling room. But this only brought that gnawing ache still more keenly in evidence, and after a while she desisted perforce, desisted because the words would not come. There was a lump in her throat that no amount of swallowing would dislodge. She rose to her feet and pressed her hot brow against the window-pane. It was blowing up for a gale outside, the sky was shot with a sinister steely grey. The sun was setting—she could see the stormy afterglow. It promised to be a wild, autumnal night, such a night as her soul loved. The window sash shook with a rattle as a gust volleyed against the house-back and tore screechingly away.

Rendered almost passionate by her solitude, Aileen tore herself away from the window, went to the bed, and groped under the pillow. In such bad hours as these she had one infallible comforter. She drew it forth now—not her Bible, but a dog-eared, tattered copy of a novel: Clark Russell's "Shipmate Louise." This she carried to where the waning light fell fully on the pages, and buried herself

in the sea-writer's realistic word-painting. She recognized it all—there was no need for her to ponder over the technical jargon, to puzzle her young brain over the intricacies of the sea. It all lay before her, a picture to be gazed upon again and again, with no fear of its stalling. Until the last ray of daylight faded she over the book, greedily devouring it, and when, impossible to read further, she closed it, it was with a heavy sigh.

"I just can't stand it longer," she said wistfully. "And, what's more, I won't." The plan was taking formation in her active young brain now. Miss Selina, the outdoor mistress, had a rooted dislike to the sea; whenever the daily walk was taken she steadfastly piloted the string of girls inland, there to discourse freely about Nature's beauties. Aileen didn't care much for Nature's charm; what she needed was Nature's masterpiece, the ever-changing yet never-altering sea.

Mrs. Merrilees, too, was getting old and feeble—she was verging on seventy, and Aileen felt that duty demanded her consideration for the faithful old soul. On those Sundays when—always provided she had not disgraced herself, bien entendu—she was allowed to spend her day with Mrs. Merrilees, the girl devoted herself to making the declining hours more pleasant, and would not drag herself away to the calling sea. And so, what with one thing and another, it seemed so difficult to get that lung-filling breath of ocean which she so ardently needed for her happiness.

"It's the worst I've done yet," she said deliberately, "and I dare say the dears"—in this fashion she spoke of the august ladies under those whose tuition her destiny was working out—"will tell Dad, and he'll haul me up for mutiny. But—I really can't stand it longer."

Then, had there been light enough, one might have observed the big grey eyes grow bright and flashing, full of a devil-may-care light. She made her preparations carefully. The window was supposed to be hermetically sealed, but Aileen had not ransacked the carpenter's shop aboard the Zoroaster without reason. She now produced a little screwdriver from her pocket and

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deliberately removed the screws that held the lower sash in place. A moment later and the window was open.

She leaned out, inhaling the good salt air in deep gusts, her nostrils widely distended. It was a stormy night, we have said, and as usual, the sense of elemental tumult appealed to some deep instinct in the girl, so that fear was gone at that first glad breath. She looked about her, searching for footholds with a nautical eye. Then, with a sigh of satisfaction, she drew back into the room and closed the window.

When at nine o'clock a discreet knock came at her door, she gave a sleepy answer, and heard the soft tread of retreating footsteps with re-window was open, and Aileen was leaning out to the full stretch of her body. Six good feet above her head a gutter ran along the roof, ten feet farther away a long rainpipe reached to the ground. She screwed up her courage, stood on the sill, and leaped upwards. The rough metal rasped her fingers, but she paid no heed. For three breathless seconds she hung at arm's length, then, working deftly, she hauled herself along to the pipe. She crept cautiously round the old house, eluded the bright shaft of light that flooded the lawn, covertly into the bushes as she heard the front door open, and then, gathering confidence, ran like a hare to the gate. This passed, she doubled down a road, and found her-

self, almost in a breath, in full hearing of the sea.

It was a magnificent night. The storm-wrack flew across the sky in a volleying cascade of blackness. Here and there the clouds thinned sufficiently to show the moon, but the luminary merely peeped elusively, only to withdraw coyly, and still the raging stormclouds tore on and ever on. Aileen had no need to pick her way. She knew it of old. There was a noble cliff a mile to the eastward of Illminster, and by stretching the imagination well, one could easily imagine it to be the storm-swept poop of a sailing vessel. Towards the cliff the girl went at a run, and, gaining the rocky path, stopped for breath.

"It's worth almost anything," she said gloatingly. "Why, it's my old sea!"

She was looking out over a vast, black-blue mystery that roared joyfully at her feet. Immediately below the sea was fringed with foam that glistened phosphorescently in the elusive moonrays. The roar and thunder of the attack on the pebble-ridge never ceased; it seemed to shake the very cliff on which she stood. An ordinary woman, and some men, would have turned back now,

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but Aileen was made of sterner stuff. The wind caught her, and buffeted her boisterously, but she laughed in its teeth and acclaimed it as an old familiar friend. Curling wisps of spray lissed out of the resonant blackness, and drove stingingly into her face; she felt the salt trickle on her lips, and clapped her hands.

This was life—rich, glorious life, not the withered, dry-apple existence which, according to Miss Selina's teachings, was the state of being to which she had been called. Aileen set her heart to the scramble, and climbed upwards, until she stood out, a daring figure, on the crest of the cliff itself. The very spirit of the storm she seemed, as she stood there, swaying slightly to the thrust of the breeze, leaning against it as a solid thing. Far below she could see the shifting, sweeping gleam of the old lighthouse that guarded the reef; still farther away, almost indistinguishable to the ordinary eye, and yet, to her keen, trained vision, plainly revealed, were the shipping lights: red, green and white. Aileen had no eyes for the old, arrogant electric of the south-bound liners, but when a single red glimmer showed and then disappeared, she leaned forward still farther.

"That's a windjammer," she cried. "Oh, the dear think." And she kissed one hand to the vanished light. In her eagerness she had drawn too near the cliff, she staggered a little, would have fallen, but—a strong hand seized her shoulder and plucked her back.

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"Good Lord! It's a woman!" said a wondering voice. It was very dark, but Aileen recognized the tone.

"It's a 'watch-below-keep-band' sort of a night, isn't it?" she said merrily. "By the way, I believe I owe you something. I was almost over."

"I might have known it was you," said Leigh. "No other woman would have been such a fool—such a well, no other woman would, anyhow."

"What are you doing here?" asked the girl. "This is my quarterdeck."

"Is it really? It's mine, too. The rooms at home got stuffy, they always do when there's a breeze on, and so I came out here to get refreshed. Jolly luck thing I did, it seems to me."

"Yes, it is. I shouldn't have liked to fall down there—even if it is my sea below—without sailing on it again. Look here, I'm out of bounds, and I only intended to creep out for a single sniff and then go back and be good, but I rather like you, Leigh. Going to have a yarn?"

The position was decidedly unconventional, but neither cared a straw for that. Illicit interviews between handsome young men and lovely girls were a thing undreamed of in the Misses Learoyd's curriculum, but to neither mind came a thought the might not have been shouted aloud in a crowded city. There was that if the clean, strong tang of the hustling sea that purged them of sentiment—they were merely comrades, shipmates for the time being. And so the talk went on; from Cape Horn to Callao, from the Crozets to the Western Isles, they followed the track of the speeding ships in their thoughts, and knew naught save great gladness of soul.

Leigh forgot that he was talking to a girl; she seemed to grip on his meaning as a brother sailor; nay, more than that, she seemed to run ahead of him at times, and instinctively foretell what was coming.

"I can't understand it," he said, remembering. "You seem to draw everything out of me, you're not a bit like a girl. I'm a silent brute, as a rule, amongst women, especially, but—now, why did I tell you how I used to feel off the Horn, when we were in that blizzard?"

(To be continued)

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