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CHAPTER XX.

Long Jake Throws Down The Gauntlet

(Continued)

"Without another word Jake went forward, fished out tar-pot and serving mallet, secured the assistance of another sailor, and came aft to perform his allotted duty. As he came he talked braggingly to his companion, spoke of "Dandy kid-gloved whipper-snappers," all this in a voice that could not fail to reach Leigh's ears. Biting his lips, angry with himself, black angry with Jake, Leigh walked slowly aft, his fingers clenching and unclenching savagely. He realised that he had lost ground—but he little knew how much. To fling round, to challenge the sailor to open combat, would be futile now. He would be the aggressor, and public opinion would be entirely on Jake's side. It is one thing for a sailor to challenge an officer, another and much more serious thing for an officer to assault a sailor. And Leigh knew all this, but he never

realised the full bitterness of the happening until, climbing the ladder, he came face to face with Aileen. Up to this moment he had not seen her.

"The breeze is holding well," he said, with forced cheerfulness, wondering how much she had seen.

Aileen turned away, her face red and angry, a fine scorn in her eyes.

"I never thought you were a coward," she said crushingly; and so went below, with a great inclination to cry upon her.

Leigh swore savagely, and went down to the main-deck again. Ten minutes later two wondering sailors picked up the battered figure of Long Jake Bronson and carried it to the fore-castle, spitting teeth and blood as it went. Leigh had a bruised nose, one side of his mouth was seriously out of drawing, he missed a front tooth and felt sore in every limb, but he was quite happy. He had fought the man fairly, had licked him handsomely, but—Aileen's word gnawed deeply into his heart. And, coming to calmer reflection, he said that he had played the fool. Was it not more cowardly to give the man a drubbing under the new pretext that he had made than to have borne the burden of the shame? For the rest of the watch Leigh brooded heavily over that flushed face and the scornful eyes.

CHAPTER XXI.

Concerning Introspection And One Kind of Courage.

Aileen had pictured to herself a gladness unknown before, even though she had known many gladnesses, for this present voyage of the Zoroaster. The youth in her cried out for companionship, and she had said that Leigh's advent would open a new door for her. She had looked for chummy intercourse, for understanding of her moods, for a sympathetic tolerance of her fancy flights—she did not always meet with the ready recognition that her wild, free soul craved from her father and Steadman—and now, she said bitterly, it was all over before it had begun. For the first time in her life the old Zoroaster became an object of aversion. She had witnessed the shame of the man she had once called friend, and her heart, preying on itself, turned sick within her bosom. This was the man to whom she had

opened her mind, with whom she had spoken of those half-wild ecstasies of mental turmoil which came to her in stormy hours. She had bestowed her confidence, almost her affection—and at thought of that word she blushed, bit her lips, and groaned—on Leigh, and this was how he had repaid. Nay, more than that, she had to strive hard to banish those now forbidden thoughts that had once come hauntingly to her in the past. She had pictured a heroic Leigh, a gallant youth, a fit companion for one of her moods; and here he was a very ordinary man—less than ordinary, indeed, for

most of the men she knew would have swung on Jake hot-headedly and dashed him to the deck in mad frenzy.

And Leigh had failed at the crucial moment, had done more than fail at that. It was bad enough to shirk the conflict; it was infinitely worse to fall back upon his authority and threaten the insubordinate sailor with the terrors of ship-law. He was a coward! She said it with set teeth; as she sat in her cabin she repeated it, holding her hands over her eyes to shut out the constantly recurring sight of the second mate's blanched face and his fixed, frightened eyes. Aileen had been used all her life to the bulldog, straightforward courage of the sea; she could not understand the shrinking of a refined nature from blood-shed and disfigurement. Had she been older, better versed in the world's ways, she might have seen that it took more courage for Leigh to turn away from the fight than to engage. But Leigh had undoubtedly made a grave mistake in falling back upon his authority. Had he shirked the fight and left it at that Aileen might have allowed him the sunshine of her smile after a sufficient interval had elapsed to bring him to a sense of his own shortcomings. A little discipline would, she said, have done him good, and then they might easily have resumed on the old terms; but now—he had added to his cowardice something which she could never forgive. To invite battle by hurling abuse on the man, and when battle offered to shield himself behind legal threats—it was the act of a base-born wretch. Thus thought Aileen in her bitterness, and look where she would she saw no comfort.

For the rest of that forenoon she shunned the deck completely, hiding herself from sight, fearful of the day. Not until Leigh had taken dinner, had had a smoke on deck, and turned in did Aileen venture forth into the open; and old Steadman, wise in his generation, scented the trouble in her face.

"What's wrong, Aileen, lass?" he inquired gently.

It was on her lips to tell him, when she shrank back. Let Leigh's shame be what it was, it was still a sacred matter. Not for her, with her high ideals of chivalry, to preach aloud the story of his undoing. She made an evasive reply, which by no means satisfied Steadman, and walked to the ward of the poop. A murmur of voices came along the deck from the fore-castle. It was a fair day, and the watch below had not yet turned in. Long Jake sat on the coamings of the fore-castle door and told his story of the morning to an interested audience—the cook, greasy and blasphemous, the carpenter, and the sail-maker, together with two English-speaking sailors. Aileen could distinguish no words, but when she saw the Dane get to his feet and aim a ferocious blow at empty air, coming black swaggeringly, she knew that he was repeating the morning's fracas for the benefit of those who had not witnessed it in its entirety. And she felt a hot, prickling anger permeate her through and through. That one whom she had honoured with her friendship should so far sink as to become the butt of a fore-castle—and of a fore-castle full of Dutchmen at that!—was more than

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she could stand. A hoarse, grating guffaw from the greasy cook told her that Leigh was being laughed at.

"So I tells him he vas come on yelled the Dane boastfully. "And he fink it. Jes, he lick me after, but he take me by surprise. I der lass word have not yet spoken on der matter."

(To be continued)

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