

A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Aileen Gains Clearer Sight.

(Continued)

He still swam vigorously, but the early vim had gone from his struggling, and a chill and deadly languor was obsessing his soul. He heard strange thunderings in his ears; he said the storm was gathering might, but when the thunder changed to softest music he realised with a shock that insensibility was hovering dangerously near. He swung himself breast-high out of the water and looked ahead. The wreck seemed as far distant as ever, and with a groan he flung himself on his back to gather strength for the renewed endeavour. Once more on his side, with the stout arm dipping handsomely; once more on his back, with his chest aching as though living fire burned within. The temptation to halt and throw off the down-dragging rope around him was almost more than he could bear—

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felt that his only hope was to turn and swim back to the Zoroaster, that his self-appointed task was hopeless. But the man who had feared to fight Long Jake knew no fear of death. All he feared now was failure—and degradation before Aileen.

"I'll get through yet," he said, and, diving it, he once more fixed his eyes on the wreck, and cleft his way through the water like a porpoise.

The edge where smooth met rough was near at hand. Borne high on a round-backed monster of a wave, Leigh saw it and shut his eyes. The hammering foam would knock the life from him—he knew that no man might fight past that mad commotion alive—but still he persevered. He was in the thick of it now—the oily patch was left behind. And then the struggle was renewed, but this time it was a struggle for mere life. The rope that toyed astern of the swimmer was curved widely, and every rolling sea seemed to drag him bodily back. But those on board the Zoroaster were working cunningly, now slacking, now holding on, that the drag might not make itself too apparent, and thus check the swimmer's course.

His strength was leaving him fast now. Each stroke required long consideration before the aching arm was lifted. The chill was creeping in, too; it settled about his heart and seemed to stop its beating. He must give up, he half turned, with a groan of despair that was only a sigh, and looked with flaming eyes over the vast expanse of sea that he had crossed. He must turn back. Already he was making back towards the Zoroaster when, dimly through the thunder in his ears, came a sweet, insistent voice, it struck through the hum of the gale; it triumphed over the of mad-dened water; it beat in upon his

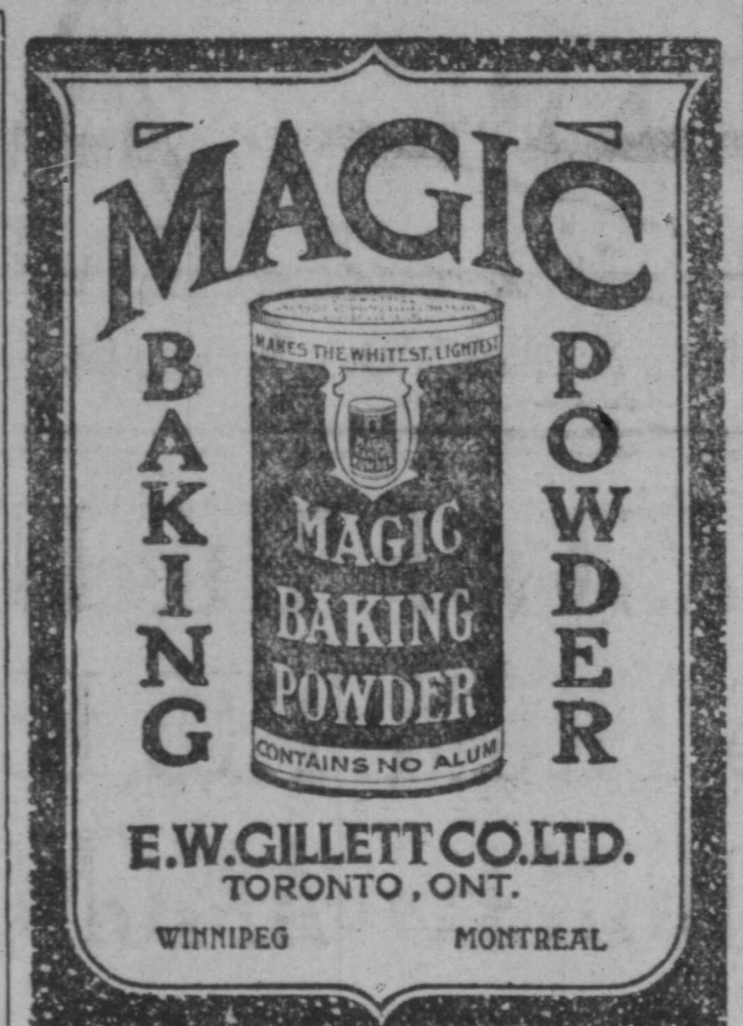
numbing brain; it conveyed a message to his fainting soul.

"O, well done, Leigh!" It was Aileen's voice! The girl had been quick to note the faltering and the turning back. She said the man had done more than human being might ever hope to do, and yet the distance between rescuer and suffering was so infinitesimal as to be of practically no account. Aileen put her entire heart into the long, encouraging cry that swept down the wind, and Leigh heard it. The shackles of his weariness fell from him bodily—he rose to the stroke like a giant refreshed. Gone was the down-dragging incubus of the saving line, gone the chill foreboding of death at his heart. He would live, he would triumph. As the mettlesome racer quickens to the prick of the spur so did Leigh quicken to the voice of the woman he loved; and Aileen saw him turn, saw him strike out gallantly, overcoming the combined resistance of dragging rope and backward-beating sea as if they were non-existent.

But gradually—nay, only too swiftly, the fictitious strength deserted him again. Every stroke became a nightmare, the foaming crest of a wave ten feet away was a distant goal which could only be reached by Titanic struggling. He measured his advance by heart-beats now, found himself expending his strength recklessly to gain a floating foam-wreath that seemed to afford a momentary resting-place, only to find it crumble away to nothingness in his clutching hand; and thus to be compelled to strike out again, with arms that felt like masses of lead, towards that vague, unreal thing that sturred and churned ahead. He could do no more.

Aileen's voice came down wind again, and spurred him to a fresh effort—he went ahead a few strokes, but then his head drooped and the restfulness of a great languor overpowered him. To rest, to lie at ease in this soft cradle of the wave-crest, lulled by the dying mutter of the storm, to sink slowly down into translucent grottoes of coral and shimmering green—ah! that were heaven indeed. And then—something stood out like fire behind his closing eyes—Aileen's face as it had been on that past day when she had witnessed his degradation. The scorn and loathing were there—he had failed.

No, by Neptune! not while his blood still pulsed through his veins. He struck out again and again, though the cutting horror at his chest made him shriek with agony; but still he struck out, fighting, fighting ever. What was that? Something smacked the water beside his ear, someone was crying aloud in a deep, stentorian voice. What? Aileen? No—her voice was sweetest music. And the rope he was towing, had somehow got foul of his arms. No; this rope was something thicker, something tangible. He looked up, and saw the low, black side of the wreck above him, felt the kindly grip of a deft-thrown rope, hung to it like a dying limpet, and so was pulled aboard the Madeleine to safety.



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Someone thrust a bottle of brandy against his blue lips, some other one wrapped a great blanket about his numbed frame; and whilst they did this the others busied themselves in the work of rescue. A signal from the Zoroaster told them to haul in on the thin line which Leigh had towed across the space, and this being done a stout, capable rope was soon in

the hands of the wreck's shivering crew. They were almost at their last gasp; the ship's deck was practically under water; she quaked and squattered to every heave of the ravening sea. But now they were in touch with safety, life had been born out of immediate death, and they worked like slaves to bring about that which they had come to renounce—safety and life. In scant time a man was tied in the bight of the succouring rope, and the signal was given to the Zoroaster to draw aboard. Fourteen times did that strange perilous gangway pass from ship to ship, but ere the tenth man had gone Leigh was up and about, eager to complete the work which he had so gallantly begun. He dragged the quaking faint hearts from the rigging where they had fished themselves, and with his own hands tied them to the rope and launched them overboard, watching them as they disappeared in the foam, to emerge half-way betwixt ship and ship; and not until each man had passed up the Zoroaster's side did he turn to the next.

"Where's the captain?" he asked of one who seemed to carry some authority.

"Dead last night. Washed overboard in the gale. So was the mate. Only carried two officers—I was bosun. Your turn now, mister."

But Leigh held back, and compelled the Madeleine's boatswain to take premier place. He steadied the man through the foam, slacked away gradually as he felt the drag of the Zoroaster's men, and then, when the sea lashed fotsam was safely under control, Leigh walked aft. It occurred to him that there might be papers to be saved, matters of great import to those who owned the ship. She was an Austrian—he had seen that from her flag—but Austrian ship-owners would need proof of their vessel's doom just as would British. He threw open the door of the cabin, and—started back with a cry on his lips. For there on the cabin floor lay two grim-faced men, and a long-hafted knife stuck upwards in a

grotesque fashion from each man's breast. Both lay dead in their own blood.

Leigh summoned up his courage and entered that grim charnel-house, wondering vaguely at the tragedy that had been enacted there. The boatswain had lied, then? He had said both officers were flung overboard by a sea; but here they were, unless he was very much mistaken, murdered. What was the truth of it all. He dare not venture to surmise. He walked past the grim, blackish pools that sullied the floor, gained the captain's room, found nothing there, and went out again on deck. There was nothing more to be done. He tied the saving rope about

him, threw up one in signal to the waiting men, and plunged into the sea.

Aileen had watched the good work progress, with tears in her eyes and a mad exultation in her heart. Dimly she perceived that she had wronged Leigh, that he was composed of fiercer mettle than any she had ever known, but through the dimness came a wave of great cheerfulness, in that he had proved himself worthy of her regard. As yet she put no name to the feelings of her soul; she welcomed the man's self-reliance and courage, as that made him free of the sea's great brotherhood, which could tolerate no cowards.

(To be continued)

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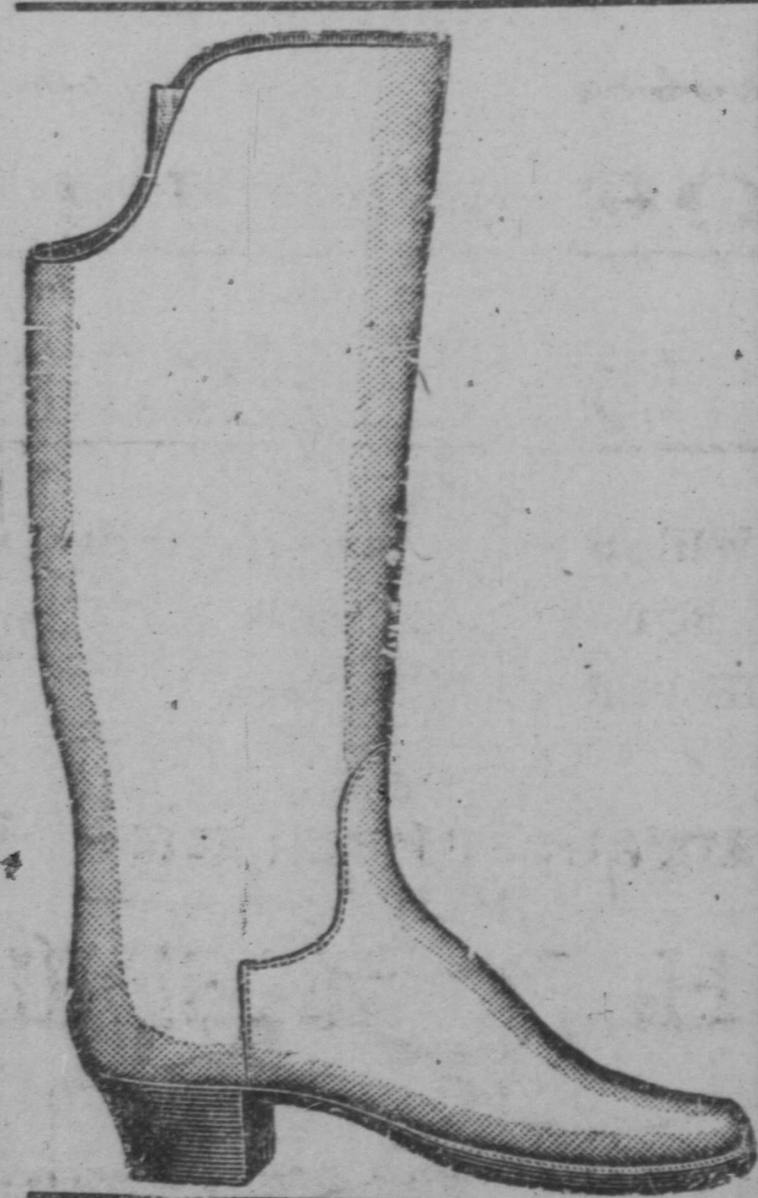
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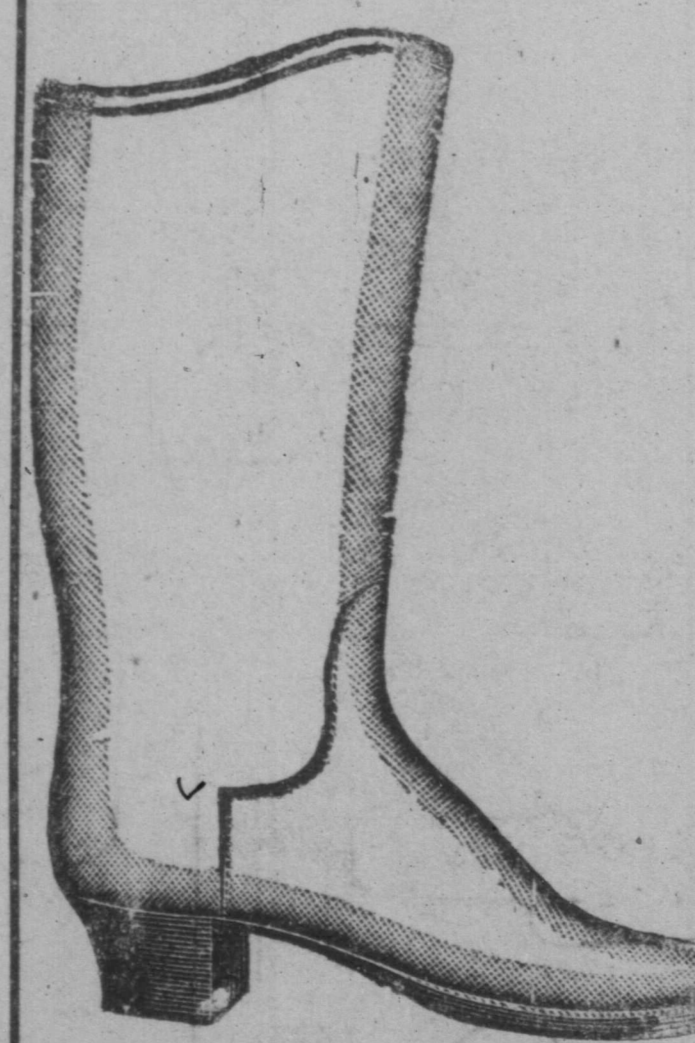
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