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A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A Warning of The Storm.

(Continued)

"Form up," he commanded curtly. "Here to windward of the deck." They did so, moving like men in dreamland, but obedient. He marshalled them into a body, and then gave the word to march, though his every bone ached madly.

"Walk behind," he instructed the girl. "Don't hesitate to shoot if a man breaks away." And then along the seething decks that strange party made its way. They staggered blindly in between crashing seas, they dashed, a gasping, miserable crew, to leeward as the ship rolled heavily; they gathered themselves together again under cover of the fore-house, but wherever they went, though the sprays bit them here, though flying ropes cut them cruelly across the face there, Aileen's revolver and Leigh's iron bar seemed to rise up and meet them without fail. And so they came to the comparative calm of the forecastle deck. They could hear the groaning of the timbers in the bow, the windlass creaked on its stout iron bed, at their feet was a small stout hatch, secured by heavy bars.

"Cast it adrift." There was no hesitation in Leigh's voice now. He had made up his mind. One or two looked at him scowlingly—a lamp swung under the forecastle head and revealed the grim scene in gross and

in detail. The iron bar flashed upward menacingly—they thought of Stubbs' shattered jaw, and fell on their knees. Off came the battens with a thud and a clank; off came the heavy hatches, and a dark and noisome pit was revealed. A rough ladder stretched downwards to unseen depths.

"Down you go—one at a time." They went alertly, but one man, the same Italian who had crouched for a spring, hung back, shifting his feet irresolutely. Leigh's eyes were fixed on the head of the man disappearing down the hatch, but Aileen was on the alert.

"Look out!" she cried, and just in time. Leigh swung round on one foot; without troubling to use the bar, he clenched his first and drove home on the point of the Italian's jaw. Aileen heard his neck click like a rifle trigger; he fell and lay still. Then, mad with rage, Leigh picked him up and hurled him bodily through the opening. He went down his scoriated skin told the tale of his swift passage—crashed down on the heads of those beneath, and the work was done. Gathering up all the remnants of his over-ried strength, Leigh flung the hatches home, clapped on iron bar and good steel padlock, turned the key, and then faced Aileen.

"Now, we've got to think of the ship," he said grimly, staggering as he spoke.

They then went aft together, not

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speaking, steadying instinctively to the lurch of the bewildered hull. They reached the poop, and Leigh took the flogging wheel in a sure grip, peered through the murk ahead, and threw up the spokes. The Zoroaster jarred, hove herself up into the wind, with her weather topsail-clews clattering mournfully, and Aileen, her weight on the lee spokes, said something must go. The wind was broad on the beam—the sails were almost flat aback.

"Hold the wheel up," shouted Leigh, and Aileen put her strength to the task, as he disappeared into the darkness. Right to the fore-braces he went, though he could not tell how he got there, and cast them loose to windward. The foreyards swung a little, backed again, swung full, and before they could flatten again Leigh was over to leeward. A small watch-tackle was slung over the rail; he took it out and clapped it on to the fore-brace. Then, an inch at a time, he took it out and clapped it on to the fore-brace. Then, an inch at a time, he got the yard hauled aft, sweating in his frantic efforts, but still persevering. It was tough work for one man—a temporary lull gave him his only chance of success. But he did the work somehow, and the Zoroaster felt the weight of wind in her head-sails, paid off so that the main filled with thunderings, and then laid her nose under a wave and sent it over her shoulder as a carpenter might a long, clean shaving. She fell off before the wind, steadied as Aileen played skillfully with the helm and then, with a booming roar, headed into the east like a hunter under a light-weight rider.

"Can you hold her for a minute or two?" asked Leigh, returning to the poop. "I'll go below and tell the skipper everything's going well."

But he did not return, and for hour after weary hour Aileen stood there at the wheel, steering blindly, for the binnacle lamps were burning dim, sensing the comfort of the ship by the feet of the wind on her hair. Leigh lay prostrate over the sill of the chart-room door, where he had stumbled and fallen in a dead faint. Over-ried Nature had asserted her claims at last, and Aileen was alone on deck.

CHAPTER XXXII.

The Track Of The Storm.

Dawn broke wanly, with a greyish sheen that presaged a betterment in the weather, and Aileen, her eyes red and weary, looked about her as one returned from another world. Objects showed indistinctly at first, but gradually, as the slow minutes passed, the scene stood out in all its revolting ugliness. Long Jake had stumbled in his blindness half-way through the rails of the poop, and hung there head downwards, one half of his body overboard, his legs on deck. He moved limply to the heave of the ship, and Aileen, focusing her eyes on the swinging body with difficulty, saw that he was dead. He was—she had swooned from the pain and madness, after storming blindly to the side, and lying there, the roaring waves had leaped up hungrily and so dashed his head against the ship's side as to render him completely unconscious. Then the choking water had done its work effectually. Jake Bronson's schemings were completely at an end.

Aileen turned to leeward—she bit back the cry that rose to her lips. Stubbs lay there; he was alive, and his appearance sullied the growing day. Never a pleasant object, he looked now like some nightmare of delirium, his shattered face still bleeding slightly, his fingers upturned and clutched like some vulture's talons. A wave of sickness overcame the girl, she turned her eyes away, but found them drifting back with a mad fascination to the repulsive countenance, that was only half a countenance, of the man who had sought her undoing. But she was no coward, the events of the past night had purged her of much of her womanly shrinking from pain and the sight of pain. She reached behind her, and found the boom-sheet on the wheel grating, a turn with it round the wheel, lashing it in place, and walked shudderingly towards Stubbs. His face was



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turned towards her, but, shutting her eyes, she exerted all her strength and turned him away. He had fallen on his side and the blood had run clear, instead of choking him—now, as she moved him, he gave vent to a hoarse, inarticulate cry. Once he opened his eyes, and Aileen, catching that glance, shuddered still more. It was madly malevolent; the glare of his eyes spoke of an unhinged brain, but his defeat had not touched him to softness.

Aileen left him and walked forward. Wherever her eyes fell there was death and horror piled upon horror. Leigh lay half in and half out of the chart-room, breathing stertorously, sunk in deep sleep in which he had fallen from his swoon without waking to consciousness. She drew him into the room, and stretched him on the floor, longing for some skilled aid. Then, as he still remained motionless, she glanced about her half shyly, and touched her lips to his. He stirred, groaned, and she, all shy, was on her feet at once. But the thrilling contact of his lips filled her with a queer exhilaration; she laughed once a low, soft ripple of something that approached happiness.

Out again to the deck, a glance aloft, a turn to the helm, and a fresh tightening of the lashing rope. Then a hasty rush below, to gasp out an incoherent statement of what had gone before to her father, who was fretting helplessly in his bulk, unable to move, not knowing what had transpired. He flung out his arms towards her, and she, laying her head on his heaving chest, broke out into long dry sobs. He patted her hair, calling her his heroine daughter, but she felt nothing of his caresses. The reaction was setting down upon her—she could only lie there and pant breathlessly, saying that all was over now.

"Rouse yourself, my girl. You've got a lot before you still."

Ah, she answered to the call of duty. She put back her disordered hair, called up a wan and pitiful smile, staggered a little, and put out a steady hand; and then, drawing herself up, she flashed question on question at her father. A moment later she was in the saloon, at the medicine chest, unlocking it with trembling fingers, seeking brandy. The steward came out of the hole in

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ging with her. But—she fell on her knees at last, and the long-pent sorrow of her came gushingly to the surface as she laid one reverent hand on old Steadman's still heart.

"Steady dear!" she whispered crazily. "Steady dear—aren't you going to speak to me? I'm all alone now. Steady dear, and I need you."

But for the first time since she had known him he did not respond to the plaint of her voice. His eyes were half-closed, his face was ghastly white, her hand was covered with his blood. Her old sea-dad, the man who had sacrificed position and prosperity that he might help tend her through her early years, had fallen faithfully in her service at last. She seized a piece of canvass from between the harness casks and covered him reverently. Another dead man lay half-way up the poop-ladder's foot. On the other side of the deck lay two men, locked together in an embrace of death. She was growing hardened to the sight by this, and she ap-

proached them without trembling. Bray's teeth were locked in the dead sailor's throat; the man's life had fled shriekingly from the gaping wound. And Bray, too, was dead—all her friends seemed to have been overwhelmed by that crimson cataclysm of death.

(To be continued)

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