

A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XXVIII. The Storm-Breaks.

(Continued)

"You'd better go below, Ailee, my lass, and get a wink o' sleep. You can't afford to lose these good hours—beauty hours they call them, don't they? Come, my girl, unhitch yourself from that backstay, and off you go. There's one bell striking; the watch'll be on deck in a quarter of an hour."

"It's too lovely to leave, Steady, dear," chanted the girl, brushing the wind-tossed hair from her eyes. "Listen, do you hear the hum of the storm? It's freshening up every second, and I'm hoping there'll be some shortening down in a minute or two if I wait patiently."

"No fear of that, girl. We shortened down this afternoon, so that we could run through the night without starting a sheet. This breeze is too good to lose, but the old ship's uncommonly awkward on her helm. How's she doing now, Bray?"

"The only apprentice carried by the Zoroaster whirled the wheel down fiercely."

"Steering like a barge, sir," he growled. "Can't tell what's got hold of her. She's eating wheel, that's what she's doing."

"Do the best you can with her, my lad. Humour her a bit; she's old, and likes a bit of pains taken with her. Look at moon, Aileen."

The girl looked upward. Over the main yard-arm the moon showed fitfully between banks of driving cloud. But she shuddered as she looked, and threw her hands to her face.

"It's the colour of blood," she said involuntarily. "It's awful, Steady. I—I'm afraid."

"Afraid, lass? What's there to be afraid of? The ship's well-found, she's only got a capful of wind behind her, and she's as dry as a bone. Nothing to fear, Aileen."

"I can't understand it. I feel as if

something were singing in the storm—singing a warning. Steady, do you believe in omens?"

"Not I, lass. Why?"

"When it's blowing a gale, as it is now, I always feel as if my soul or some part of me that I can't see were drifting miles away from myself and looking down on the world from an infinite distance. I feel that way to-night, I can see the sea beneath me, and I can see the old ship scudding through the water like a living thing; but all astern of her floats a red wake—that is like blood." Her voice was hushed and the now hidden moon to the rich creamy track astern.

"Girl's fancies. Better go to bed and get to sleep, lass. No good spoiling your pretty eyes by staring at the phosphorus. Blood! Why, child, you're dreaming? What has blood to do with a sailing ship in these times? Away below—there's eight bells striking already."

The bell on the wheel-box clanged out eight solemn strokes, and the listening girl shuddered again. To her it sounded like the passing bell. In reality Bray, obedient to a word from Steadman, had rung the signal for the change of watch. Barely had the echoing answer come from forward than a silent shadow drifted out of the darkness of the main deck, sprang lightly up the poop-ladder, and went to the wheel. It was the Spanish boatswain, and Bray opened his eyes wide at the sight.

"What's wrong, bosun?" he asked in a whisper. "It was not the custom aboard the Zoroaster any more than it is aboard any other ship for the boatswain to take a trick. The Spaniard glanced towards Steadman and lifted his finger in warning."

"Hush," he whispered. "I think Jake seek. He not like take it hellum to-night. A noche, savvy; he sleep good. I take it hellum for Jake. You say nothing; photo kick up a dust s'pose he think Jake malado."

"Oh, I don't care," whispered Bray,

who, after his violent exertions at the wheel, was half asleep. "East and by south, southerly. Watch your lee helm—she flies off like mad at times. There—she's half steady as she is." He relinquished the spokes and passed into the obscurity, flinging the course over his shoulder as he passed the mate. Then he went down to the half-deck, took his pipe, lit it, and climbed into his bunk.

"I'm going, Steady, dear," said Ailee, as feet sounded on the lower step of the companionway to indicate Leigh's coming on deck in relief. "Good night. I wish I didn't feel so strange. I'm sure something's going to happen. Do you think it's likely the ship's on fire?"

"Not a bit of it, lass. Away you go, and sleep. You'll waken in the morning with a sore head if you don't go now. Hello, that you, Leigh?"

The second mate yawned sleepily, snuggled himself into his monkey jacket, and looked blindly out at the howling blackness of the night. "Coming on to blow a bit," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "How's she doing, sir?"

"She'll do just well enough. A bit sluggish on the helm, though. I think I'll point those forward yards an inch or two when the crew musters. They seem a long time in coming. Wonder if they've been called?"

The two officers walked towards the break of the poop as Aileen slipped tightly down the companionway. The girl had spoken the truth when she said she felt some evil was hanging over the ship. A strange nervousness, entirely new to her in storm, was playing havoc with her mental peace. She started back from a swinging curtain in the darkened saloon, and a little exclamation escaped her lips.

"You there, Ailee? You ought to have been in bed long since. Come and say good-night." It was her father's voice from his room, the door of which was hooked back. She went in with a rush as the ship lurched.

"You ought to be asleep, you had father," she said reprovingly; and the shining beauty of her face as revealed by the dim lamp-light made Curzon smile.

"I can't sleep to-night, girlie. The cabin's close, and I've been wondering what will happen to you if—if you know?" He had told her the truth at

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last, impelled by some mysterious desire for revelation.

"Don't!" the cry was wrung from the girl's overburdened heart. Don't, dad! You know we promised not to speak of things like this again. We're going to get the best doctors in Australia aboard as soon as we get to Sydney, and they're going to operate and tell you it's only a case of local pressure. Don't you remember I read out a case exactly like yours, and the result of operating was perfect success?"

"Yes; but we've got to look facts in the face, Aileen. If I go out this tide you'll be all alone. Old Mrs. Merzoes won't be able to look after you now—she was on her deathbed. You'll not be left to starve, my lass, for I've not spent all my earnings by a good deal, and you'll be able to live in some sort of comfort; but—I'm afraid, Aileen, you'll be ashore at the mercy of every Tom, Dick, or Harry who carries a cunning brain. They'll come to you and ask you to invest your money in wild-cat schemes, and you'll be flung out on the world penniless. The shore's a hard place for unsophisticated folk who've lived all their lives at sea. There are bigger sharks in London than ever floated in the Pacific. You'll have to marry someone, girl—that's all there is to it."

"I'll never marry," said Aileen. She was quite sincere, be it noted here. No flutterings of love had ever stirred the depths of her nature; her frank, free comradeship with men had taught her many things, but the one essential had what yeust touched her heart. Not a single blush suffused her face; she look-

ed steadily at her father as he lay in his bunk, his face white, his eyes regarding her intently.

"I'll never marry anybody 'but a sailor," she said at last. "And I won't do that until you're—you're—" Her voice broke a little and she shuddered, but deftly turned the shiver into a yawn. "Silly man! If there were another man as good as you in the world then I might think about this foolish idea of yours. But there isn't."

"You mustn't marry a sailor, Aileen. A sailor's wife is practically a widow these days, as I've told you before. No, no; a shore fellow is the kind of husband you want. One who's versed in the wiles of the land, my girl, who can take your part in the battle and fight for you with heart and hand. That's the man for you."

Aileen made an indescribable gesture, which expressed her loathing for anything pertaining to dry land.

"We'll talk about that when the time's ripe," she laughed. "But even then we'll marry a sailor, won't we? No, thanks, dad; no white-faced land man for me. I've lived amongst men too long for that. I'll need a man who can rule me, not one I can rule myself. A strict disciplinarian—one who doesn't lose his head in emergency. Someone who can think and act simultaneously, and act right—right. Oh, there's no one quite like a-sailor in all the world."

"But, Aileen—you must listen seriously. Better still, go to bed now, and we'll talk this over afterwards. But my wish is that you should think about the future, for it seems to me that future will be dark and clouded over. Like to-night, my lass, like to-night. Listen: there's a squall striking down. Hark to the strain and hum of the topsails. There, she heels to it. She's going over, over. My God! What's that?"

Aileen sprang up, all trace of nervousness gone from her face, but white as a sheet. A stifling, choking cry had come faintly to other ears; there was a dull thud on the deck overhead.

"Can't tell what's keeping those chaps," grumbled Steadman. "They seem asleep. Watch ahead!" He lifted up his bull-like voice and sent it beating ahead of the lifting storm like a thunder-clap. There was no re-

sponse. Not a single figure showed on deck; the darkness was all unpeopled.

"Lee fore-brace," yelled Steadman again; but still the howling of the wind, the thrum and rattle of the tight stretched canvas, were the only answering sounds.

"There's a light in the fore-castle, too," said Leigh, walking to leeward. "I can see it through the port. I'll nip along and see what's wrong."

"Don't you trouble, Leigh. I'll rouse the loafers out, and give 'em something to think about. They're too slack by half lately. I'll point the fore-yards a bit before I come aft. Watch the steering, old chap; she's a bit wild."

Leigh felt upon him a mad inclination to arrest the old sailor's intention. Something sinister seemed to be overhanging the ship that night. She lurched drunkenly, she sagged like some sodden wreck—there was no resiliency, no buoyancy in her advance. But Steadman had made up his mind. He removed his oilskin coat, hung it carefully over the pin-rail, and, in thick, knitted jersey and high sea-boots, rolled easily down to the main-deck. Leigh watch him for a long moment, and then, with a strange feeling in his heart, walked aft.

The figure by the wheel felt under its oilskin coat and gripped something there, something heavy and cold. Sebastian, the boatswain, withdrew a long iron-belaying-pin on the wheel-grating between the spitoon and the wheel-box, where it would not roll to leeward. Then, lounging over the spokes, he eyed the dim-seen figure of the second mate carefully, measuring his distance.

"Steering all right?" queried Leigh, his eyes on the uneven wake, hardly visible in the darkness.

Sebastian grunted, and laid one hand on the belaying-pin. Leigh came nearer, but the Spaniard hesitated to strike. A hundred thoughts careered through his mind. Leigh was six feet high, his fist was heavy as lead. If he struck a blow from the front and missed, that fist might lodge painfully between his eyes before he could rise to the second blow. Better to wait until Leigh turned his back, as he must assuredly do in another minute. He would stand beside the compass presently, would lay one hand on the bi-

nael, and, bending, would peer into the glass. Then would be the time for a down-swigg blow that would shatter cap and skull at once. Sebastian knew Leigh's ways, knew his invariable custom was to take a long glance into the compass, to see that the black lubber's line was on the point that marked the vessel's course.

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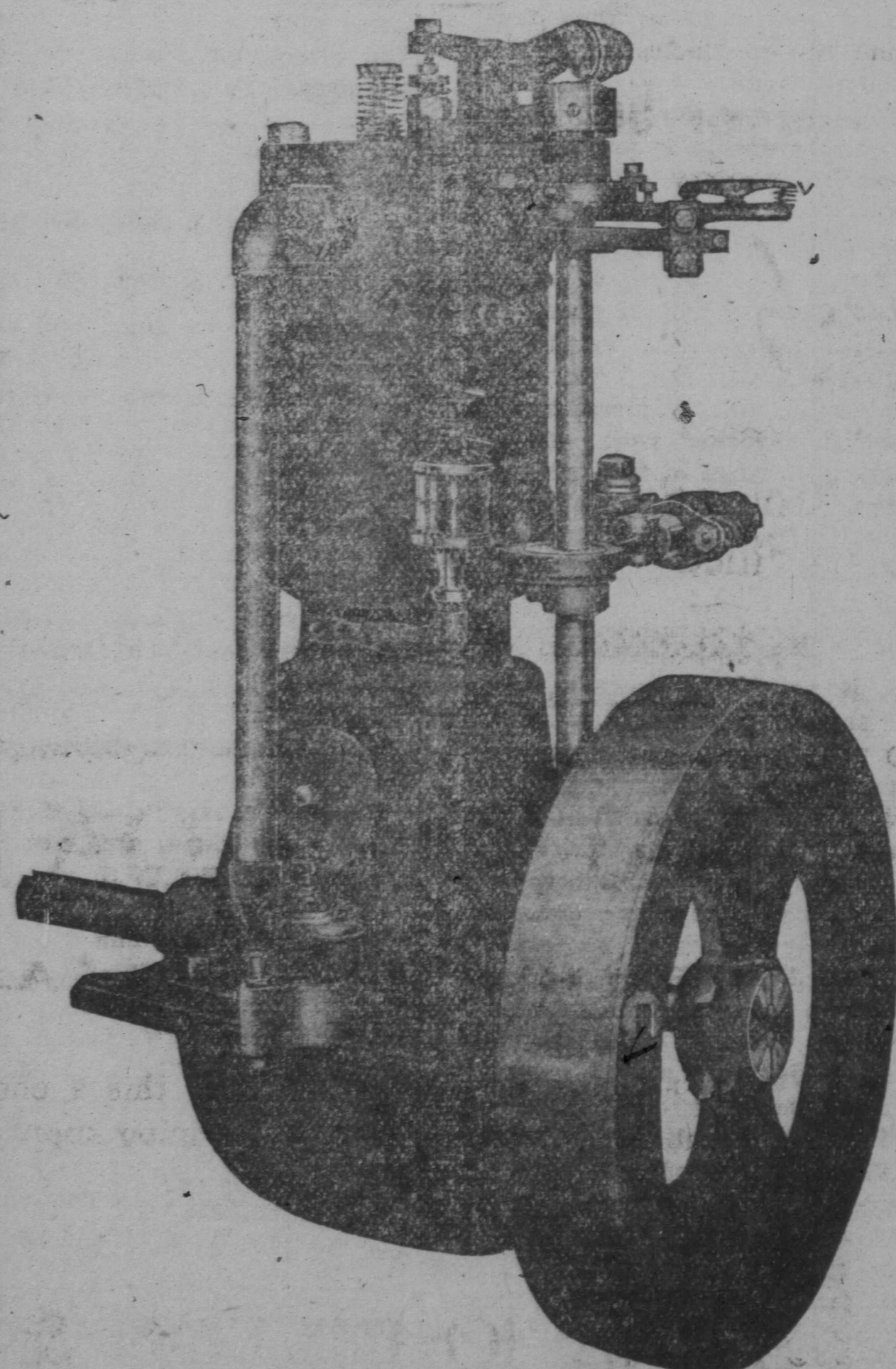
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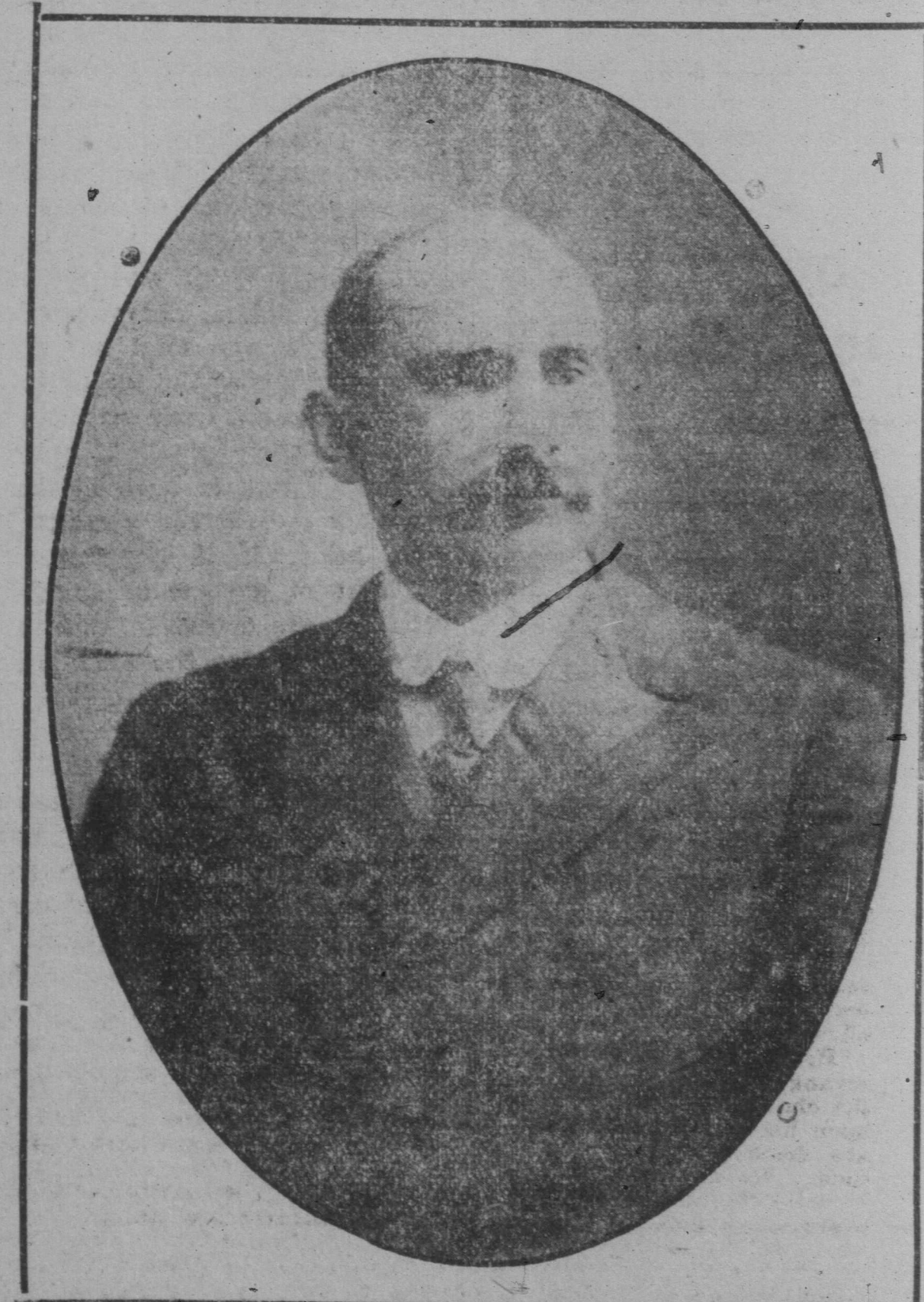
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