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A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Merrilee's Comes Aboard.

(Continued)

"She wants more," said the skipper, reaching for the milk tin.

"Ay, she's a greedy little atom," said the mate, grinning vacuously into the wrinkled face on his arm. "but we must go easy, sir. Now, we'll put her down, and she'll sleep it off like a bird." Aileen protested, but Steadman, wise in his generation, treated her with stern aloofness. Not for nothing was he the father of three children, and old remembrances came back to warn him in a hundred devious ways. For five minutes Aileen howled loudly, defying the shrilling of the waning storm to drown her voice, but after that the yell became a sob, the sob a long-drawn breath, and quietness fell as something solid on the room.

They left her there, snugly protected against the violent roiling which, with the dying away of the wind, had set in. The Zoroaster was now a hot-bed of discomfort. She was sweeping her mastheads through a wide arc against the untrammelled blue of the sky; she was stopping water inboard from her scuppers on both sides; the rattle of chain, the drumming of ropes, the scuffling thud of some loosened weight in the hold, spoke of her weariness after the gallant fight. Men were toiling busily, lashing here, unbending there; some whistled as they worked, others swore. The cloud had lifted, the ship of sorrow had become a ship of life and hope—the proverbial short sea-memory was asserting itself—on-

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A SERIOUS DISAPPOINTMENT

In the midst of the immortal Burns, who have been some aggressors in the "City of Sydney" district, a letter arrived in the reversal of their old plans. Little did we think that our many well laid plans would be "agreed" when we ordered shipment of our early spring necessities.

The news that this costly cargo is now but rot and rust, let alone among the Sambre breakers means a serious disappointment to many but to none more so than to those busy office people whose "Globe-Werriple" steel filing cabinets and special filing devices, started with much flourish and care, are now beneath the Atlantic. They are now in the hands of the "Globe-Werriple" boat, the best vessel, and the only one that has however to be sent to the "Globe-Werriple" Coast.

It is a serious disappointment, and we have informed that the raincoats and other goods were re-shipped without delay.

ly now and then did one man or another glance at the almost deserted poop and think of that flying, white covered form, and the solemn words spoken a day before.

There was so much to be done now the gale was over that neither Captain Curzon nor any man aboard the ship had much time for introspection. There were some aboard, notably Fraser and Vigors, who felt the ship empty and deserted, for these two in particular had been drawn under the sweet influence of the dead woman, and had learnt anew the lessons taught in quiet homes where love reigned supreme. Fraser in particular sorrowed deeply; he found himself glancing unconsciously at the seat which Mrs. Curzon had been wont to occupy at table, and often a strange mist would dim over his young eyes; a queer huskiness come into his throat. He had been appointed to the vacant steward's post; he did his work carefully and well, and rejoiced in it, for he felt in some blind, boyish way, that by being constantly near the child he was in some measure repaying the debt he owed the mother.

Every moment he could spare from his duties he devoted to the child, watching the mate as he prepared the food, assisting here, suggesting there, busying himself in a hundred devices for Aileen's comfort. He it was who, later, fashioned the rough mass of rags into a marvelous doll, a doll that

possessed a far greater charm than any creation of the Lowther Arcade; he it was who, by dint of careful reading in abstruse books, rose to a sudden emergency when Aileen lay choking and gasping, strangely blue in the face, on the point of death. When even the matrimonially experienced Steadman stood by in suffering silence, when Captain Curzon leaned, white-faced, against the bunk and prayed voicelessly, Fraser came forward and took the reins in his sure hands, and his brain—the inherited brain of a lawyer, quick to seek a cause and to find an explanation—grappled with the needs of the moment, and brought Aileen, trembling and weak, back from the verge of the Infinite on which she had tottered for breathless minutes.

It seemed now as though the Zoroaster were free from that haunting dread which had kept her back. As if hesitating to reach the scene where the vanished life must be rendered back to Him who gave it, the gallant old ship had slugged slowly forward, dead crept and stopped, lingering in dread of the fateful time. But now the work was done, the gentle soul had fled; and the Zoroaster put her best foot forward, lurching to the kiss of the strong, clean wind, and before the shadow was fully lifted the cry went out from the watching men aloft: "Land ho!"

When the Zoroaster ranged alongside the wharf at Port Pirie, that so-called, dismal South Australian township, unlovely to the eye, unpleasant to every sense, Aileen was held in her father's arms, and the wee white face wrinkled into watching smiles, whilst the great, fathomless eyes peered watchingly over the dusty wharf into a future that none might forget.

"What you ought to do," said the agent, when the whole strange story was told, "is to put the child out to nurse. Get some decent motherly woman to adopt it; it's the only chance the mite has of living. You surely don't expect a baby to thrive on board ship, amongst a lot of men!"

They were sitting at dinner in the saloon as the agent spoke. Before the last word had passed his lips Steadman, Vigors, and Fraser, who was hunting the dishes around, checked, stiffened, and with one accord looked

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ed at Curzon. Their faces were full of an unasked question, an entreaty. They had barely known Aileen a month, but—the thought of parting with her was more than they could bear.

"Not a bit of it," said Curzon slowly. Three distinct sighs of relief sounded in the saloon. "Do you think I'm going to trust the child to any hireling's care, when I've got eyes of my own to watch over her? I've made up my mind, Mr. Ferrars. The child's my own, and I can do as I like with her—subject to her welfare being regarded. I've calculated and reckoned up, and I've come to the conclusion that Aileen's going to accompany me for a while."

"Then the kid will be dead inside a month," said Ferrars scornfully, laughing in his sleeve.

That remains to be seen. There are ways and means, my friend. If the

baby lived through the first three weeks, under such conditions, without any skilled attention, fighting against big odds, she's got enough stamina to bear her through whatever might happen along. To sea she goes with me, and it will be time enough to talk about putting her out to nurse when we get back to England."

"You might buy a cow, sir," suggested Steadman tentatively. "We have a lot of room forrad, and the food won't take up much space. I expect we'll go to the West Coast in ballast, and fill up with nitre there. Hay stows close."

"The very thing, I'm shy of that condensed milk, although it stood us well. We'll buy a cow—do you know where we can get one, Ferrars? A good milker. We'll buy it, and then the child will have every chance."

"Better get a woman, though, sir," suggested Vigors. "Some old-fashioned, motherly soul who wants to get home. She'll be worth a dozen cows."

It was a strange sight to see these weather-hardened men of the sea, men who faced death every waking hour, men whose working conversation was almost unfit for polite ears, gravely considering over the welfare of a month-old mite, who lay in the captain's room purring contentedly beside a weird ball of rags and canvas that bore some faint resemblance to a doll. But they entered into the discussion with a great concern. They might have been settling the future of the entire mercantile marine to judge from their faces.

"I believe I know the very woman to suit you," said the agent. "If you will persist in such a mad scheme. She came to me the other day. Her husband brought her out to the silver mines—he died there. She hasn't got a friend in the country, and she's getting on in years, so she won't be falling into mischief, as a younger woman might. Unattached women aboard ship are the very deuce, but I'll wager Mrs. Merrilee won't cause any throats to be cut."

He brought the widow down to the ship next day, on a visit of inspection. Mrs. Merrilee was well over fifty, she had known sorrow, she had seen the world. She was outspokenly critical of the manners of the Zoroaster's crew, as they stood by to watch her come aboard, and brought her white umbrella down thwackingly on the

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head of the boatswain, who so far forgot himself as to put his tongue in his cheek.

"That'll teach ye manners to your betters," said Mrs. Merrilee as the boatswain retired in confusion. "My, what a mucky hole of a ship!"

The Zoroaster was indeed unsightly. Her trim yards were slanted this way and that, her decks were a raffle of cordage, coal-dust, grime, and packages. Great piles of dunnage wood lay here and there; the only means of getting to the poop was by climbing a tottering ladder. Mrs. Merrilee gripped her umbrella firmly, wound her skirts about her legs, and boldly faced the ascent.

"It gets muckier the farther one goes," grunted the good woman suggestively, as she halted at the companionway. A confused smell of kerosene cooking, stale cheese, and varnish came up to meet her nostrils; she sniffed in fine disgust.

"About time there was a woman aboard, I should say," she said to the agent, who was piloting her to her destination. Captain Curzon was not in the saloon, he was in his own room, bending over the cot. Aileen had just wakened, and the skipper was longing for deft-handed Steadman, who was away ashore on business. Awkwardly enough Curzon picked up the frantic moped and took it in his arms. He held it to his breast, and again—as often before—that strange wave of passionate tenderness careered through him.

"Hush, then, hush," he crooned pitifully. Aileen sobbed the louder, her voice rising to a shrill crescendo of spite. Curzon looked about him helplessly. He patted her back considerably, she screamed the more. He laid her on his knees, she rose to undreamt of heights of passion. He inserted his thumb between her toothless gums, she sobbed for a moment, then wrenched free, and the ensuing scream almost shifted the roof-beams.

"I don't know what to do," murmured the helpless father. "I wish Steadman was here. Lie still, baby."

"I should say there is need for a woman," cried a shrill voice in his very ear, and, before he could move, the baby was whisked from his arms. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, sir. Can't you see the poor thing's hungry to death! Hush, then, hush—so! Where's the milk, sir?"

"Are you the—er—the lady who was recommended?" asked Curzon, surprised beyond measure, yet wholly relieved, as the sobs died away and calm reigned supreme.

"Not so loud, sir—yes, I'm Mrs. Merrilee. Oh, the pretty dear! Ah, the sweet thing! Hush—sh—sh! Not quite so hot—you'll scald the poor darling's mouth. Dip the bottle in cold water. Yes, that's right. Now then—it's a little duckums of a dear, it is."

Aileen settled down with a contented grunt, and the bottle was speedily emptied. After that there was no doubt in anybody's mind. Mrs. Merrilee took up her quarters in the Zoroaster's spare cabin, with an air of defiance. Captain Curzon mentioned salaries tentatively, to be received with proud disdain.

As if I was going to haggle over a shilling here and a shilling there—snorted Mrs. Merrilee. "This poor lamb 'minds me of my little Martha, that died. Fix the wages to suit your self, captain, but leave me be. Where's her things? Ay, men aren't much use. Wrapped her 'up in rough blankets, you have, when she ought to be in flannel and lawn. Dear me! pins like this! What's safety pins for? I'd like to know!" Her voice was purely vengeful by this.

Curzon retired, leaving Mrs. Merrilee with the "honors of war. But it was a great relief to him to entrust his child to those deft, capable hands. Times without number he had felt that a woman's care was an absolute necessary to the baby's welfare, but he could not bring himself to part with the mite, who, on that first sad day, had twined her tiny, helpless fingers round his great forefinger, and had clutched firmly at his heart-strings in so doing. Now all was well. There remained only to win the approval of those others—Aileen's self-appointed godfathers. Steadman came aboard, and was ushered down into the saloon. Mrs. Merrilee looked up, an unspoken threat on her face, one hand raised in warning. Aileen was fast asleep on the good woman's breast. Mrs. Merrilee was busy already, her quick fingers sorting and restoring her nose expressive of disgust.

(To be continued)

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