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A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM !

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XXII.

Aileen Learns Something of Fire-Arms

(Continued)

The Channel storm blew itself out within two days, and by that time the Zoroaster had reeled through the short full seas of the narrow waters to meet the roll of the Biscay swell, wind hounded from the north and west. But

she was no longer a comfortable ship. There was subdued, but none the less dangerous, ill-feeling betwixt the after guard and the fore-castle. Men scowled whenever an officer appeared; the evenings, which in olden times had been dedicated to enjoyment and the care-free ruminations of contented sailor-men, were now made dark by low and hissing murmurs. It was seldom a sailor showed on deck in his

watch below, and there was no amity between the two watches. This in itself was a good thing, for it kept the impending trouble under to some extent. There was none of that cheerful willingness to obey a legitimate command; men slung along where before they had sprung light-footed to comply with the spoken word.

The two days' gale had taken the heart out of the crew. The work had been hard; the chill northern latitude had congealed the thin blood in their southern veins; they were miserable in body and villainous of soul. None of the three officers could look back on that blow in the Channel with equanimity or look forward to the coming rigours of the Easting with aught but

dire forebodings. Yet, chivalrously, working with great unanimity, the three Englishmen kept the truth back from Aileen to the best of their ability. Some time, they said, would come an explosion, but there was no occasion for alarms as yet. And they began to hope, as day followed day, that their fears were groundless, for not a single man showed himself openly mutinous. It was the sullenness, the hang dog slackness of the men that told the tale more effectually than open violence. A smouldering fire is ever the more dangerous, for the watcher cannot tell where to play the hose.

The Zoroaster forgot her sluggishness now, and seemed desirous to hasten away from that gloomy, impending terror which seemed to hang broodingly, like a grim and ominous albatross, over the entire fabric. She swept grandly through the long, serrated rollers of Biscay, caught a strong, invigorating gust of the north-east Trades south of the Azores, and went towards the Line like a beautiful bird, every sail stretched and panting to the steady thrust of the heaven-sent wind. And once clear from the chill dampness of the northern skies, a freshness and restfulness seemed to settle about her, so that hearts grew light and tempers more even as the long summer days flocked on and on.

But had they known, those three, what talk went on behind the jealously closed fore-castle doors, they might have viewed the future with less complacency. It was Long Jake who took the chair on such occasions, and he, speaking in a weird patois of English, Spanish, and Portuguese combined, laid down the full list of their woes with no uncertain voice. There were moments when, looking round on the shining teeth and scowling brows of his auditors, Jake said the time was ripe for a blow; but he was enough of a leader of men to realise the need of some other one of his own kidney to bolster up the wavering uncertainty of the impressionable Latins when the actual time for movement came.

The Zoroaster was become a seething cesspool of sedition, and the old ship felt it in every timber. She tried her best to rid herself of the incubus, and on one occasion actually hove three men off the topsail yard in a tropical squall; but they fell this way and that—one overboard, whence he was picked up by a quickly lowered boat, one into the main-braces, where he suffered naught save a serious fright, and another into the slack of the mizen staysail, whence he was rescued but little the worse. The click of a steel-like discipline sounded on her whitened decks, but it was the discipline of an autocracy, where men ruled by might, and not by affection. Even Captain Curzon, who had long looked on sailor-men as something of brothers, found a strange harsh rasp

growing in his voice, and his fist invariably clenched itself automatically when he spoke to the sailor-faced brigands who stood lolling at the wheel. They kept it from Aileen as much as they could, but the girl was far from blind. She sensed the reigning unrest as a hound scents the passage of a fox, and a vague restlessness grew up in her soul to which she could give no name. At times she said it was the

languor of the enervating Tropics, at work in her blood, at another she put it down to the antagonistic presence of Leigh, who avoided her as much as he could, seeing that his nearness was distasteful to the girl. And, noting the studious avoidance of the man who had championed her in the long ago, Aileen grew petulant—she who had always been as open and bright as an equatorial day!—and said, to herself, that Leigh had spoiled her life.

Long ago she had found it in her heart, seeing him daily as she did, to forgive him for that act of cowardise so-called; but the first advances, she said, must come from him. She desired him to present himself at her feet, a humble suppliant for her favours; for she had become used in the past years to great adoration and was something of an autocrat herself, realising her power over her immediate friends. But Leigh held aloof, for the iron of her condemnation had eaten bitterly into his soul. Not until he felt himself righted in her sight would he crave her returned friendship; and so the silly fellow ate out his heart in silent misery for brilliant week after brilliant week, longing for a smile from the girl he loved, yet dreading to see her draw near him lest the boundaries of his own injured self-esteem should fall before her attack and his defence prove of no avail.

"What's that for, dad?" asked Aileen one morning when she entered her father's room and found him busy with the second of his revolvers—the one of which the cylinder had jammed. Curzon looked up apprehensively and attempted to shuffle the weapon out of sight, but his daughter laid an insistent hand upon his fingers and would not be denied.

"I thought we might get a pot at a shark or two when we get out of the south-east Trades," said the captain lamely. "It's not bad fun, girlie."

"I know the kind of sharks you're thinking of, dad," she replied, with intuition. "They don't swim in the sea—"

my old sea wouldn't breed that kind. You're afraid of something—I know it."

"Not I," lied her father stoutly; his face twitched as he pictured a possible future, with his well-loved daughter in the hands of that criminal crowd forward. He had already made up his mind to keep one bullet for her in the event of the worst conspiring and the men, by sheer force of numbers, gaining possession of the ship.

"Let me look," insisted the girl. "Ah! it's the old one. The new one would do well enough to shoot all the sharks you'd see. There's trouble afoot, dad; I know it. So you'd better make a virtue of necessity and tell me all there is to tell. You're afraid of mutiny, aren't you?"

"Not exactly mutiny, Aileen, but those rascals might need a show of force to bring them to heel. However, there's no need to meet trouble half-way, so I'll put the thing away and we'll wait till it rains before putting on our oilskins."

(To be continued.)

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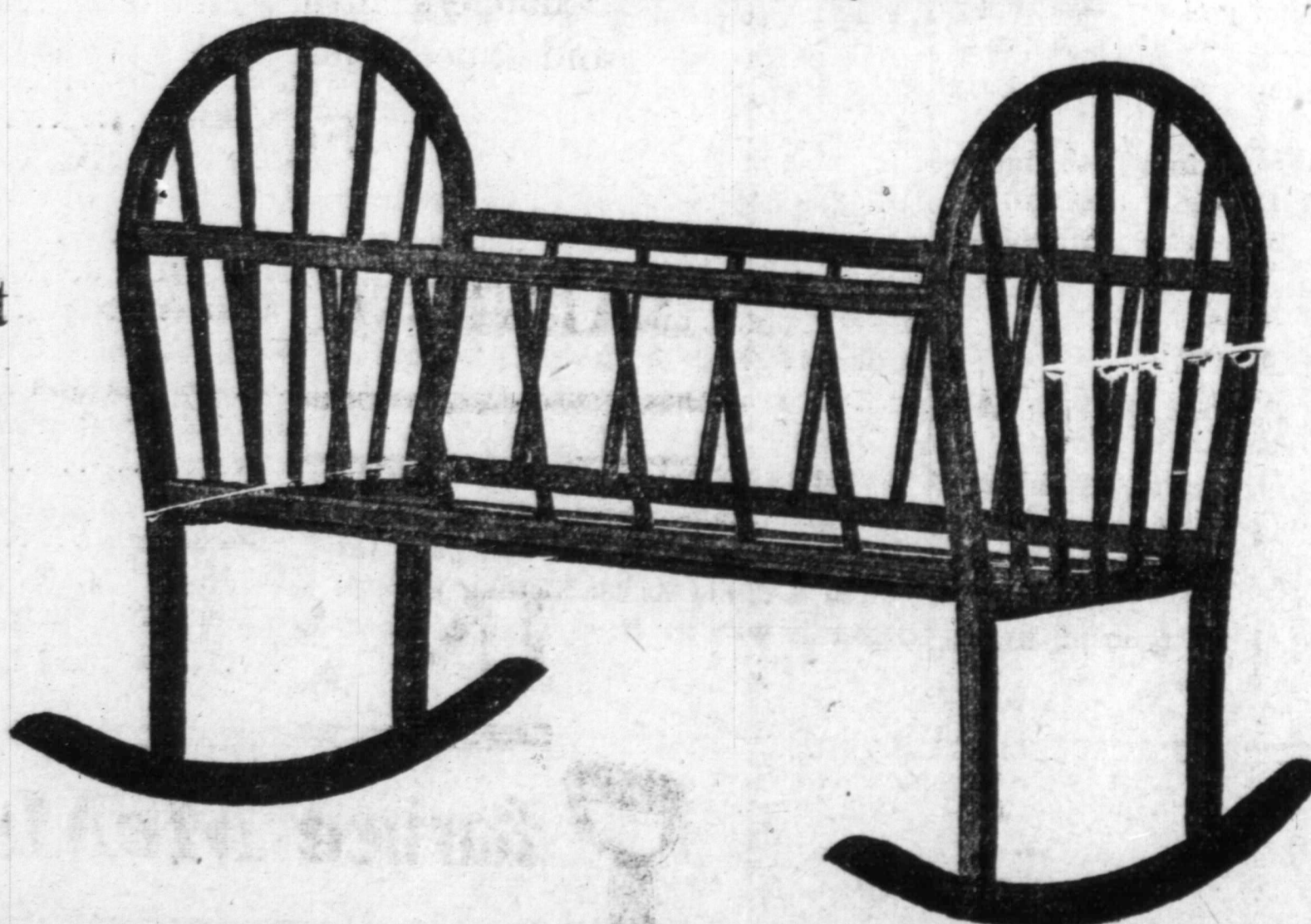
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