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A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW

CHAPTER XV.

One Crowded Hour.

(Continued)

"Here, child, take the wheel," he
cried at length impatiently, and the
girl could hardly believe her ears.
She was to be entrusted with the ship!
She, a girl, was to hold the welfare
of the Zoroaster between her own slender
fingers for an indefinite time! It
seemed absurd, undream-of. But
there she was, holding the spokes tena-
ciously, her father's big bulk disap-
pearing forward. She bent her keen
young eyes on the compass, and called
on every faculty she possessed. As if
the curving Zoroaster knew the
touch, she quieted the wind on the
beam, but Aileen knew that any sud-
den lurch might be fatal to those gal-
lant struggles on the topsail-yard, and
so, with set teeth and stiffened mus-
cles, she gauged the "feel" of the ship.
A magnetic current seemed to run
from her brain, down her arms,
through the wheel to the very hull it-
self, and girl and ship became for the
once one soul. Her slightest wish
seemed to communicate itself to the
fabric. Once, when a vast white mass
came leaping and bounding devastat-
ingly out of the darkness abeam, and
poised threateningly over the bul-
warks, Aileen shut her eyes, but her
brain had sent the message: "The
sea must not break aboard." And the
Zoroaster answered the call nobly.
Up she went, high and higher, until
had it been daylight, the gleaming
copper of her fore-keel must have
shined for fathoms. The sea picked
her up, and shook her like a rat, but

swung on and under, the clamour-
ing bow dropped gently down again,
and that pressing danger was past.
She was quite alone on the poop,
she might have been, for all evidence
to the contrary, a stray soul roaming
unheeded through raw time. Only the
frenzied hurrying of the gale surround-
ed her as a solid thing; she leaned for-
ward, breasting the swirling air, and
felt it thrust her back. The vast pro-
fundity overside, the blackness of the
sea, was shot here and there with
long streaks of ghastly white, but
above her head no single gleam was
seen—save that, at long intervals, zig-
zag lightning roamed and fumed
through the hell-brew of the storm.

Most men would have cowered down
in fear, crying on their God for aid
crushed, bewildered by the liteness
of themselves when weighed against
the tumults. But Aileen had in her
the spirit of the storm itself—it was
her heritage. She sang aloud, she
laughed as slatting spindrift smote
her in the teeth, she held out an em-
bracing arm to welcome the crashing
waves that broke solidly on the deck
at her feet. She knew no fear, nay,
she joyed in the glad striving. The
storm to her was a friend, a kindred
soul, and in that hour of mad dark-
ness, when the world and the sea
seemed to have gone out together hot-
foot to the farthest realms of space,
she sang her song and held to her post.

One by one men came plunging and
plunging aft, dashing the wet from
their clothing, growing and cursing,
yet breathlessly, as men who have
outfaced death. Steadman came to
the wheel and saw the figure there
ungainly and triumphant in salt-soak-
ed oilskins.

"It's Aileen, by gad!" he cried aloud.
"I thought we'd got Rhys here."
Sweeter words of praise never fell on
woman's ear. He had likened her to
Rhys, the cunning seaman, the crafty,
years-taught helmsman! She thrust
her arms through the spokes, and
flung both hands towards him in her
old free gesture.

"Oh, thank God for the sea!" she
sobbed.
And then her father came, exultant,
proud. They had saved the sail, but
they said that none could have work-
ed there aloft had not the ship been
tended by a cunning hand. Aileen had
tasted her sweetest hour.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Manners of Stubbs, Second Mate.
Was there fly in the sweet ointment
of her happiness? Yes, one—Stubbs,
the second mate. That man, hard as
the nether millstone, his ingrained

brutality impervious to the winning
sweetness of the girl, saw in Aileen
nothing but the captain's daughter, a
spy, one who reported his derelictions
of duty to her father, and brought
about the well-merited reprimand. He
believed falsely. Aileen would sooner
have cut off her right hand than have
spoken one treacherous word behind a
man's back. The man's faults were
self-evident; his voice could be heard
uplifted in soul-sickening oath, in
vile-worded command, along the en-
tire deck.

Curzon had sized him up from the
beginning, and, seeing the man with
whom he had to deal, had treated him
according to his lights. Stubbs was
borely civil to Aileen from the very
first, but behind his wrath lay a cer-
tain just admiration for the girl's
effort skin. At times the virginal of
what his fixed, bestial stare meant,
got instinctively alarmed, turned aside
with shrinking from his meaning re-
gard, and waves of hot shame coursed
to her brow. The man's very look
was an insult to any woman; what his
thoughts were none but himself could
know.

Perhaps it was not entirely Stubbs'
own fault. A man of low mind, with
the worst traits of two nations in his
venue, dragging himself from the
portable by dint of dogged perse-
verance to an officer's berth, trained in
Nova-Scotian, ships that thrust the
iron of spiritual degradation into
men's souls, the associate of small-
souled men, who looked on life as one
long spell of hardship, only alleviated
by grisly carousals ashore, lured on by
painted-faced harpies to the squander-
ing of his tollfully won gold, the vic-
tim of every saloon-keeper, with his
finer instincts besotted by coarse
liquor, a man who had never met a wo-
man without her price, he was not
fitted to judge a girl of Aileen's in-
nocence. To him women were play-
things of an hour, to be associated
with vile drinking-dens and smoke-
laden public; tawdry, shameless,
coarse as he himself was coarse.

And years of such associations had
brutalised him beyond repair. Aileen,
who could never believe that any sail-
or was hopelessly bad, at first expend-
ed the shafts of her sweetness upon
him, and tried to bear herself towards
him with her usual care-free camara-

derie; but Stubbs mistook her mean-
ing, and saw in her advances but the
sly coquettishness of his chosen femi-
nine friends. Aileen found this out
in time, and her manner changed. Yet
Dutchmen, men who were socially on
a far lower plane than Stubbs, re-
alised her charm, and softened at her
presence. But this man, hard-swear-
ing, unmoral rather than immoral, re-
fused to take her proffered friendship,
and surlyly held aloof when he found

that she was not one of his stamp.

At times, when her adventures aloft
had kept her late for meals, Aileen
would sit with Stubbs at the dinner
table, and would try to interest him,
as she interested all others, in the life
that surrounded them. They had, per-
haps, overtaken a ship; had flashed
across the heaving grey of the sea
those bright-coloured bunting mes-
sages which are the sailors' telegraph.
But to her surmises and her sugges-
tions Stubbs returned nothing save
growing doubts; and yet, ever and
anon, the man's loathsome gaze was
fixed upon her as the eyes of a flesh-
lilled cat might narrow on an unsus-
pecting bird. Once Aileen looked up
and caught that glance focussed full
upon her. A strange nausea over-
came her; she lay down knife and
fork, the food disgusting her palate.
Stubbs dropped his eyes with a leer,
and Aileen tried to resume her meal,
her healthy appetite craving for the
food, but she could not. In common
courtesy she sat until the second mate
was done, but she never willingly ate
alone with him again.

"He seems to affect me like a head
wind affects dad," she ruminated won-
deringly. "It's very strange." It was
very strange that any sailor should
affect her thus. They were her broth-
ers and intimate friends, welded
into her affection by the great bond
of the sea; but Stubbs—she shuddered,
and that intangible loathing obsessed
her again.

"And he's so different from—from—
well, say dad, or Steady," went on her
thoughts. "Yes, and altogether dif-
ferent from Leigh."

Her head quickened its beat as her
thoughts travelled towards the lad
who had helped her to escape from
the trammels of the shore. And yet
she never recognised the sign. Leigh
was simply a dear lad who had chiv-
alrously come to her aid in the hour
of her need, and beyond that he was
nothing to her. Of course, he came
into her affections along with all other
who wore a blue coat; but—she won-
dered where he was now. In all like-
hood at sea. He had known whither
the Albemarle was bound, but rather
fenced the West Coast, and in that
case their chances of meeting again
were slim in the extreme. He had
flashed across her life momentarily,

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as ships flashed across each other's
tracks at sea, had signalled her, and
rendered help, and was now away on
a separate course, full-sailed, to meet
whatever gales and calms fortune
might chance to send.

Aileen had never said anything to
her father about that kiss tendered to
her well-nigh unconscious lips by
Stubbs. The kiss itself was a vagu-
memory; she remembered it but dim-
ly; but the loathing ensuing on it had
never been dispelled. She determined
ly kept her distance from the second
mate, however, when she realised that
he was inwardly hostile to her, and re-
membered strongly the caress, which,
she had tried to think, was in reality
a freak of her imagination. Steadman
had said nothing of the kiss either—
he had punished the perpetrator in his
own rough, ready way, and the matter
was forgotten.

Forgotten, but remembered hotly by
Stubbs himself. And as he gazed at
the slim figure of the captain's daugh-
ter, he found himself passing his dry
tongue over his hot lips at the mem-
ory of that illicit salute. Burning
thoughts passed through his brain; he
devoured Aileen with his eyes, the bad
press in his maver at the top, now rose
paramount, and the good, if there were
any, had never a chance. He said no-
thing to a soul of his desires, but lay
low and thought hard.

The Zoroaster made Sydney, in fair
weather, and anchored in the most
beautiful harbour in the world, glad
to rest her wearied self for a little
while. Aileen accompanied her father
ashore, and looked with interested
eyes on the colonial city, which, but
for its heat, might have been England.
But the shore soon tired her, and she
was never so happy as when aboard
the ship. She was taken to houses
where lived those who knew and re-
spected Curzon, and was made much
of; she was a curiosity to the buxom
women and the long, lank men. They
revived her old name of "Storm
Child," and coaxed her to tell of her
experiences; but Aileen had so much
of the sea in her that the recital of her
doings came reluctantly. It was one
thing to act, and another to speak.
And besides, these women talked of
things beyond her comprehension—of
clothes and beaux, things she hardly
heeded. Certainly clothes were neces-
sary to cover her, but why hearts
should break over the cut of a skirt or
the set of a blouse puzzled her exceed-
ingly. Then, too, there were certain
pettinesses evinced, jealousies, a hun-
dred unlikable elements. Very dif-
ferent this from the outspoken, broad-
minded men of the sea with whom she
consorted as an equal.

She was more than glad when the
Zoroaster had discharged her cargo
and had been towed round to Newcas-
tle, there to be loaded with coal, and
when the proud bow once more turned
to the east to cross the placid Line
for Frisco. The first ripple that ran
noisily under the ship's dry scuppers
was a welcome from her friend, and

she never left the deck that day until
her father carried her below, and set
arms, and bade her take the rest she
needed.

(To be continued)

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