

A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Stubbs Holds "The Joker."

The smoke hung reekingly in the fore-castle, and dimmed the already dim light of the swing lamp that creaked on its hook above the table. As many of the men as could be gathered together at one time were present, and they were not good to look upon. With the exception of a few of the watch on deck, all the crew of the Zoroaster were there, the foremast hands, that is, from the boatswain to the cook, and all were pregnant with purpose. Long Jake held the floor, but close at his hand was Stubbs, named on the books of the lost Madeleine as Morgan, and Stubbs was one of Jake's own kidney—a brute-beast, but with a certain cunning of intellect that made him more dangerous by far than ever the Dane could be.

"Vere's der risk?" cried Jake, in answer to a jargon of tongues that greeted his previous speech. "Der skipper's par-lysed, mates; oldt Stead-

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man vasn't vorth a curse; jung Leigh, damn der blackguard! vas a shvine. Maybe he drags ju outer der vater, vell, vot's dat? Any man der same would do. He can't fight not at all, andt as for dot infantt Bray, I'll eat him mit mine own teet'. And den—"Then for a bit of a trip round the Islands," said Stubbs gratingly. "Plenty o' good grub, loads o' drink, aye, and women to play with when ye feel in the mind. Dusky beauties, mates—kindly ones at that. It's God's truth I'm telling you, you cowards. Take the blasted ship, men, run her up somewhere where her cargo'll fetch its weight in gold—I know of a dozen places; stop hidden a bit till she's forgotten—they'll say she's gone down in a gale—and then we'll change her name, and off to the Islands with her. Who's afraid of a bit of blackbirding? They don't do it now, they say, but I know men who want servants, and they ain't the chaps to ask ye where they come from. Why, it's a blasted picnic, nothing less."

"Dere vas first de officers to gon-elder," grumbled a lathy Swede, with a face that would have secured his conviction in any British court of law. "Some of us vill certainly be shot or knocked on der head. I haf no love for hard blows, gomrades."

Jake sneered vilely. "Dutchman! Vas it afraid of its hide? Vell, dere's some here vas not, anyhow. But, mind dis: dose vat gets der biggest vack of der spoils. Vas you savvy dot, Squarehead?"

"Yah, I savvy. Andt I hides mine-self in der cable locker, but once der killing work is done I comes on deck andt vorks decent. I have a great notion for a leedle vife of der islands, and plenty grog."

"Hola, amigos." It was the grating voice of the Spanish boatswain now.

"I spik but leetle English myselfs. But—ve do not the young senorita kill, eh? She is too pretty, too soft. She is all lovely like a donna of Spain."

"Ve'll look after der voman," cried Jake, with a meaning glance at Stubbs. "Say, matey, vasn't she more dan half a peach eh? Guess dot's der future Missis Yake, andt dere von't be no hunting all over der shop for a blasted devil-dodger, don't it?"

"The girl comes to me," said Stubbs briefly, his hand flying to his knife-hilt. "I've intended to have her for a matter of three years now, and I ain't a man who doesn't get what he wants."

"Hands off, Morgan," growled the Dane. "Fair's fair, mate. Ju vas der last comer aboard dis packet, andt I guess ju'll yust have vot's given ju."

"We'll settle that later," said Stubbs, and his hand tightened round the haft of his knife. "Let's get to business. What in hell's the matter with starting to-night? We'll wait till the change of watch, and then—we'll wipe the curs out to a man."

"Not to-night, pard." Jake's face was almost ashen white at the impending nearness of the coming horror. "Dose fellers ain't got der spunk needful. Say, ve'll need some grog to put spirits into der blasted cowards. Prime 'em vell andt dey'll fight like devils; but keep 'em cold andt sober andt, it's God's truth, dey'll hide like sheeps. But dere's grog to be had for der taking."

"Eh, what's that? Grog to be had for the taking? Where, I'd like to know?"

"Der forehold's full of it—spirits. 'Un of der stevedores told me, Dere ain't nothin' but a vood bulkhead between forehold an' fore-peak; a man vas cut t'rough it in a vatch. Say, ve'd better git a move on an' start right in. Git der stuff up to-night, an' serve it handy, den vatch our chance an' serve it out; an' den, ven der boys is good an' full, ve'll make tracks for aft an' settle der biz straight off. Dere's only t'ree sound men an' der skipper, who don't count. Ve kin hit him on der head after der orders is



done for. Say, Morgan, let's speak of der girl, now. Don't I goin' to have her?"

Stubbs sprang to his feet with a vile oath. "Not on your life!" he snarled. "I'll tell you what, Jake. Get out the cards, and we'll play for her."

It was a grim and terrible scene that followed behind the jealously locked door of the fore-castle. The Spaniards, Italians, and Dutchmen gathered round the table, the dim light glancing from sea-hardened faces, from gold ear-rings, from steel knife-blades. Each man smoked copiously, the major evil-smelling cigarettes, but some preferred the more satisfying pipe and a plug. Outside, the steady rush and roar of a fourteen-knot breeze sounded stridently; inside, the oaths and bitter expletives of the two players put the strife of the elements to shame.

"That wins, blast you!" growled Stubbs, throwing down "the joker" and sweeping the cards off the table, whilst the men recoiled aghast at the awful, livid fury on Jake's hatchet ace. "I reckon I'll make her repent of her dainty stand-offishness before I've done with her—the slut. She'll curse the day she ever fought shy of Mr. Stubbs, second mate."

"Ju've won, curse it," said Jake. "But—ve'll see. Still, she ain't der on-ly pebble on der beach, not by a long

chalk. Cuss der vimmin, anyway. Now, let's settle up vat is to be done."

Outwardly the man was calm, inwardly he was a raging furnace. He had taken the decision of the cards as final, because it was not to his interest to lose so valuable an ally as Stubbs, who, on his own boastful confession, had stabbed the captain and mate of the Madeleine to death in their own cabin. But afterwards, when once the work was done, and wholly done, there would be a reckoning day; and he, Jake, was as good a hand with the knife as ever Stubbs, or Morgan, or whatever his name was, might be. A short, swift upward stroke in the dark, and Jake would have possession of the ship and the girl, and Stubbs' rivalry would be a thing of the past. In the meanwhile, however, he sank his thoughts behind his beetling brows and entered with gusto into the details of the plot to capture the hapless old Zoroaster.

It was a pretty villainous scheme that was outlined there before the glaring eyeballs and the twitching fingers. They were to rise on some appointed night, when enough of a storm was blowing to ensure the attention of the officers to their ship, and, by dint of scheming, get those officers into their power. Well primed with stolen spirit, they would find no difficulty in gaining the necessary courage for their coup de main, and a few deft blows with knife and belying-pin would speedily remove all possible opposition. Jake worked on the passions of his hearers, painting the glorious freedom of the coming life in glowing colours; but this left them unmoved.

It was when he spoke stridently of tyranny, of grinding their faces, of the autocratic sway of the officers, that the hot blood of the Spaniards leapt fire-like through their swollen veins and mantled darkly on their foreheads. Revenge was the note to strike, and Long Jake struck it with no uncertain hand. Written here his arguments would read gruesomely, almost ridiculously, for they were spoken in a babish prattle, a conglomeration of languages, an intelligible word here

and there, the rest choice profanity in lingua franca.

Somewhere were among his hearers who owed their present life to the gallantry of one of those officers whom they were dooming to swift death; but what of that? The sailor's memory is proverbially a short one, and a full week and more had elapsed since Leigh had risked his life to give them life. It was a thing forgotten: their saviour was an officer, a being accursed. Let him also die the death apportioned out for all aft, save one; and for her was reserved a fate beside death would be a welcome thing.

Little by little Jake wound them up to such a pitch of frenzy as made him cast interrogative glances at his companion villain, for it seemed to the Dane, carried away by his own rough oratory, that the time would never be ripe than now. But Stubbs knew his men better than his confederate. He knew the Spaniards would fall at the crucial moment unless their courage was aided by copious draughts of fear-defying brandy; and it would never do for the attempt to fail, once it was set on foot. Stubbs had read not long before of the fate meted out to a mutinous crew, and it was no wish of his to swing at the end of a hempen halter.

"Ye'll do now, Jake," said Stubbs, when the speaker paused, exhausted with his own rhetoric. "They're fit and ready now; but we must wait. What we've got to do at present is to play 'possum. Run when one of the officers speaks and say 'Aye, aye, sir,' as if we meant it. That's the game until we're ready. Let's see—it's my middle watch. Well, I'll set to getting the grog along. Just enough to prime the boys, eh, and not enough to stupefy? Leave that to me, mate, and rest easy. As for the girl—well, she's mine, and I ain't the man to let go what I've once got a hold of; but you may bet your bottom dollar we'll get you another. Bye-bye."

Eight bells had rung out on the fore-castle bell, and the crew trooped aft to muster before being relieved for the night. Bray, who stood at the break of the poop naming each man,

laughed aside to Leigh as cheery "Aye, aye, sirs," came booming through the darkness.

"What did I say, sir?" he whispered. "They've come to hand like sheep with a little judicious treatment. Keep 'em down, that's the thing."

But when Leigh went below that night he rummaged in a drawer in search of something heavy and shining, but it was not there. He tried to remember where the pistol was; recollection told him it was stowed away in his chest—itself in the lazarette. "I'll get it to-morrow," he said; but other cares intervening, he forgot.

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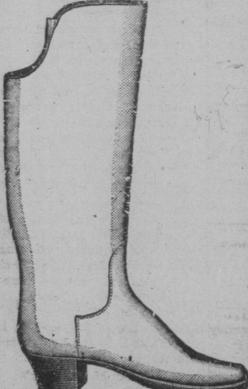
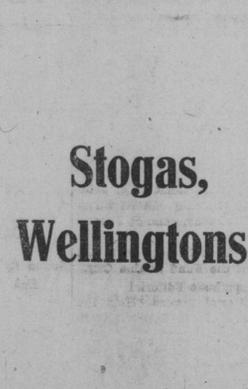
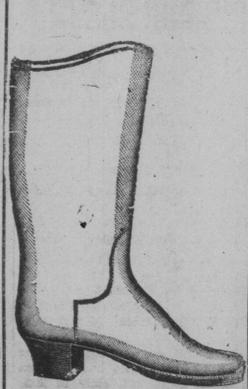
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