

A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Gathering Of The Storm.

(Continued)

"No, sir, I find I've been mistaken. I half expected trouble when we gathered in that crowd of scum, but ever since we turned them to work they've forgotten their grievances, and are quite tame. I count ourselves safe as a house now."

Thus Mr. Steadman, sitting beside Captain Curzon, who lay extended, his lower limbs quite useless, on the settee in his own room. Aileen, looking more beautiful than ever, notwithstanding the concern behind her eyes, sat close at hand, reading from one of her favourite books. Of late she had seen but little of the deck, and had not noticed the new additions to the Zoroaster's crew with any great amount of interest. She was vaguely worried about her father; that sprained muscle of which he complained to her was long in recovering tone, and she felt that all was not as it should be.

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like to think you've got the lad at your back. Bray hasn't ever been tried in an emergency, and he might lose his head, but with you and Leigh his shouldn't come to much harm."

He stopped, and Aileen, quick to read the weariness of his face, motioned Steadman away. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the mate, who had the afternoon watch below, had stopped in passing to throw a word of greeting to his helpless captain.

"I think it's going to freshen up towards sunset," said Curzon, as Steadman was disappearing. "You'd better get her shortened down in good time if the glass is falling, for we've tried these Dagoes before in heavy weather, and we needn't repeat the experiment. Send word up to Leigh to get the kites down in plenty of time."

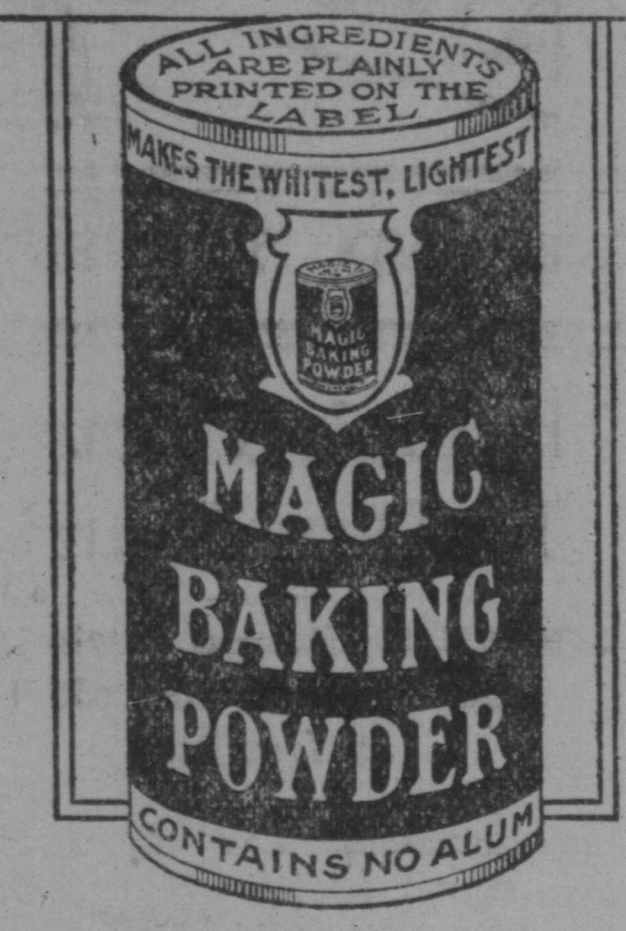
Steadman went slowly on deck and consulted the barometer. It was falling and pumping a good deal—a bad night was prophesied. He bit his pipe in the chart-room and went towards Leigh, who was leaning over the rail, watching the orderly procession of waves astern.

"Yes, I've been thinking I'd get them down almost at once," said Leigh. "I've got a feeling—it might sound foolish to you, sir,—that something awkward's going to happen to-night. Anyway, I wouldn't like to be left in the lurch with a crowd of flabbergasted Dagoes again. So I'll get the watch along at once."

He blew his whistle, and when the boatswain appeared gave the necessary instructions. Was it a premonition of what was coming that had caused Captain Curzon to give that command to shorten sail? It was the only thing that could have saved the Zoroaster, in view of what was pending. The elemental passions of men were massing together for a wild explosion, and the elemental anger of the winds was conspiring to aid.

The watch on deck turned out yawningly, for they had been taking advantage of the Sabbath idleness to snatch a few winks of sleep. To Leigh it seemed as if there were some strange good-fellowship existing

NO ALUM



amongst the men; they fell back on the ropes with a cheery heartiness somewhat different from their usual sullen obedience. More than once the young officer fancied he detected the reek of spirits, but the smell had gone before he could make up his mind. He upbraided himself for an alarmist, but he felt so sure that his senses had not deceived him that, once the ship was down to fairly short canvas, he walked forward and dropped down the fore peak. It was almost dark there, and his fingers, as they passed over the stout bulkhead, could not distinguish the brightness of sundry nail-heads that had been fresh yammered into place.

Stubbs was something of an artist in his own particular line, and was not the man to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar. Many a bold venture, he knew, had failed for lack of such little precautions as those he had taken. Leigh gave a sigh of relief as his hands felt the apparently untouched bulkhead, and said he was mistaken in his surmises. No one had tampered with the precious, deadly cargo of spirits; the demon that let loose amongst the crew, might work for evil was securely chained. Had he been able to penetrate the walls of the fore-castle he would have seen many of the cases which he flattered himself were intact stowed away in locker and

bunk, whilst the reek of brandy hung heavily in the place.

"There won't be much more work to-day," said Stubbs, as the deckwatch settled down on chest and locker. "Get yourselves primed up, mates. We know what we've to do—it's all arranged. This shortening down is so much in our favour. Now, then, let's rehearse the game again. At eight bells, midnight, we don't muster aft. One of the damned officers will come along to see and we won't answer when he knocks. That's clear. He'll come in. Now, who's to settle him?"

Whitened face stared at whitened face—none, jumped to the task. It was one thing to charge aft, a mad-dened crowd, and there spill blood like water; it was another thing to murder an unsuspecting man in cold blood.

"We'll deal for it," said Stubbs, with an oath. "Get the cards, Jake." The ace of spades fell to Stubbs, and he licked his lips nervously. Then, without a word, he rose from his place and disappeared.

"He was funkin'," said Jake; but a moment later Stubbs reappeared with a hone in his hand. Wetting the stone, he commenced deliberately to grind his long-bladed sheath-knife to a keen point.

The slow grinding grated harshly on the hushed air of the cabin—men gazed wide-eyed the one to the other. That ring of steel on stone presaged the death of a man—of more than one, maybe. But Stubbs never looked up now. His eyes were fixed and blood-shot, his lips muttered soundlessly, his hands trembled occasionally, only to steady again to the work, until that work was done, and well done, and well done, and the knife-point showed like the point of a stiletto.

"That's good for any blasted officer," snarled Stubbs at long last. "Turn your back, Jake."

"Not if I knows it," said the Dane, with a biting curse. The man's nerves seemed on edge. He sidled along the sea-chest that held him covertly, seeking to put a safe distance between himself and the cruel steel.

"Don't be a damned fool! I'm only wanting to see where to strike—when the time comes." Stubbs laid the knife carefully in his bunk, and then seized Jake by the shoulders. Slowly, with a cold-blooded carefulness impossible to describe, he ran his tarry fingers over the man's swelling back-muscles until they rested pressingly on one spot under the left shoulder-blade.

"Reckon that's near enough," he said. "Now, one swing o' the arm, like that"—he drove one finger into the man's flesh, and Jake let out a yell—"one swing o' the arm, and the thing's done. Pass that brandy bottle, curse you, and let's have a swig! It's going to be a cold night."

The Spanish boatswain, at a sign from Stubbs, now went on deck and detached several heavy belaying pins from the rail. They were of iron, some two feet long—terrible weapons in strong hands. One blow would suffice to smash in the skull of a negro, and two or three of the embryo mutineers swung them to and fro to get a correct balance. The grimy ports let in but little light on this wild scene, but there was more than light enough for their short preparations.

At five o'clock the cook of the mess went to the galley as usual, returning with a steaming kit of hash and a great can of tea. Within the next few hours many of these men would be potential murderers; meanwhile, they staved off the hunger-pangs as callous as if the coming night promised no long story of treachery and death. Stubbs seemed possessed by a sudden burning thirst; he slaked it repeatedly from painkin and water-but, but ever the thirst returned, and the iciest draughts of the Arctic could not have quenched that mad burning in the man's hot throat.

"Don't ye forget the order," said Stubbs, who, by virtue of the task that had fallen to him, as also on account of his strength and viciousness, had seemingly elected himself leader. "No one to stir when eight bells go, except Bobastian, who'll relieve the wheel—understand? We'll all be in this fore-

castle. I get behind the door as soon as we hear feet coming towards us—you stand ready. Once the devil's down out we go, and aft at a run. Kill whoever stops ye, an' I'll settle the skipper. Then—me and Jake'll see about dividing the spoil."

He went over the grim instructions time after time, forcing them into the memories of the dullest there, and until by dint of such repetition, he considered they would perform their allotted tasks mechanically. For over an hour the heads bent together, and twice in this time Stubbs rose nervously, took out his knife from his bunk, and resharpened it. The anxiety and the waiting were driving him resistlessly; he sivered at every sound from without. Once, when a shiver clanked weirdly to the thrust of the wind, he jumped up with a yell, only to subside, again, grinning fatuously, and staring from under deep eyebrows at any who would venture to smile at his terror. And the Zoroaster panted in her stride, quivered throughout her length, and slogged on the helm like a frightened thing.

(To be continued)

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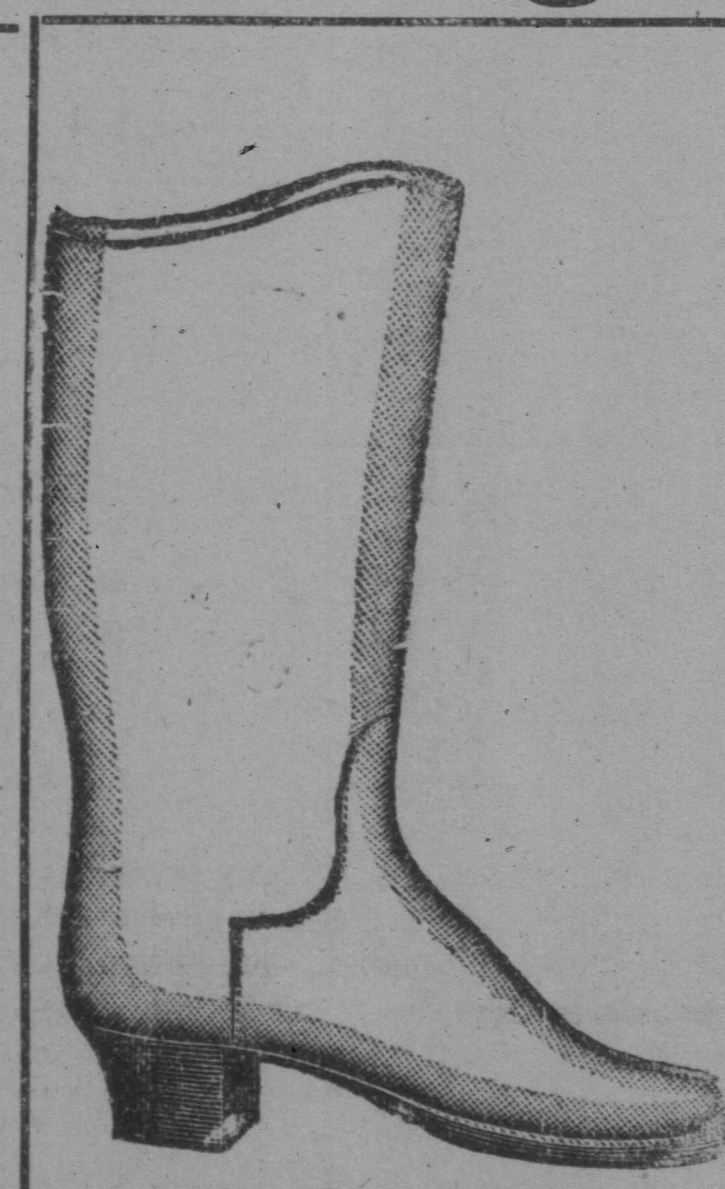
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