

A DAUGHTER OF THE STORM!

BY CAPT. FRANK H. SHAW.

CHAPTER XIX.

Concerning The Stowage Of Spirits.

(Continued)

Leigh drew the sleeve of his serge jacket across his brow, and left a red track across the grime. It is hot, dirty work superintending a ship's cargo stowage; it is trying to the temper and wearing to the nervous system. For close on a week now the young officer had spent each and every day crouched in between evil-smelling packages of cargo, attending to the varied minutiae of stowage at one moment, reprimanding a light-fingered stevedore the next, as that worthy's all too subtle fingers crept towards some fat-looking cases of jewellery. But now the work was nearly over, and the cool air of the upper world came gratefully to his heated senses. He stepped out of the nearly filled main-hatch, and the rubbish-littered decks thoughtfully.

"The old Zoroaster doesn't look much of a prize-rocket," he said to himself. "I'm more than half sorry that I did not engage aboard her. But, of course, it will be different—when—"

He left that thought unuttered, and a slow blush deepened the tan of his outdoor life. Even yet he hardly understood the impulse that led him to throw away all those gilt-edged chances of advancement which had been offered to him to satisfy a whim.

"It's a hundred to one that she's left the ship, and that if she hasn't she's engaged to some shore-going chap with a tidy income of his own. If she is I'm a dashed fool, and if she isn't—well, skippers don't generally encourage overmuch intercourse between their daughters and their second mates. However, we've made our bed,

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Leigh, and we'll try to find the soft corners of it. Eh, what's that?"

The foreman stevedore had shambled towards him with a dust-hoarsened query as to the stowage of some fresh cargo.

"That's a rummy notion," said Leigh, shifting his peaked cap to the back at this time! How much is there?"

"Four hundred cases, mister. Blackwell's best brandy—thirty-year-old stuff, and marked, 'With care: perishable.'"

"Enough to set the town on the drink! Let's reckon up our space. There are those five cases of jewellery down the after-hatch, and we can't attempt to unstuff. Then the powder's going down the main into the temporary magazine. That will fill up the main hold pretty effectually. There's only the fore-hatch, by Jove!"

"Lot's o' room there, mister."

"Yes—but—the crew hang out forward and—sailors are uncommonly fond of brandy. Well, it seems the only thing to do. Still, Lees, I don't quite know. Can't you manage to hold the stuff over until the mate comes down?"

"Very well, sir. There's that trifle of general goods in the shed, and we can go on building up down the fore with it. Expecting the mate aboard soon, sir?"

"Yes, he said he'd join to-day. We sail on Friday, don't we?"

"That's her day, Mr. Leigh. You'll hang off Gravesend for a day, though, to take in the explosives. Hallo! here's the mate himself. Might ha' known Mr. Steadman wouldn't be late."

Leigh breathed a sigh of relief as he caught sight of the squat figure of Mr. Steadman coming gingerly over the rail. The mate had a leather portmanteau in his horny fist, and a man behind him carried a sea-chest, whilst a well-stuffed sailor's pack reposed on the truck at the edge of the wharf. Leigh dusted the thick of the dirt off his hands, straightened his collar, and went aft.

"You're the new second, eh?" asked Steadman in a friendly fashion. "Just out of your time, I suppose?"

"No, sir. Passed extra. My name's Leigh."

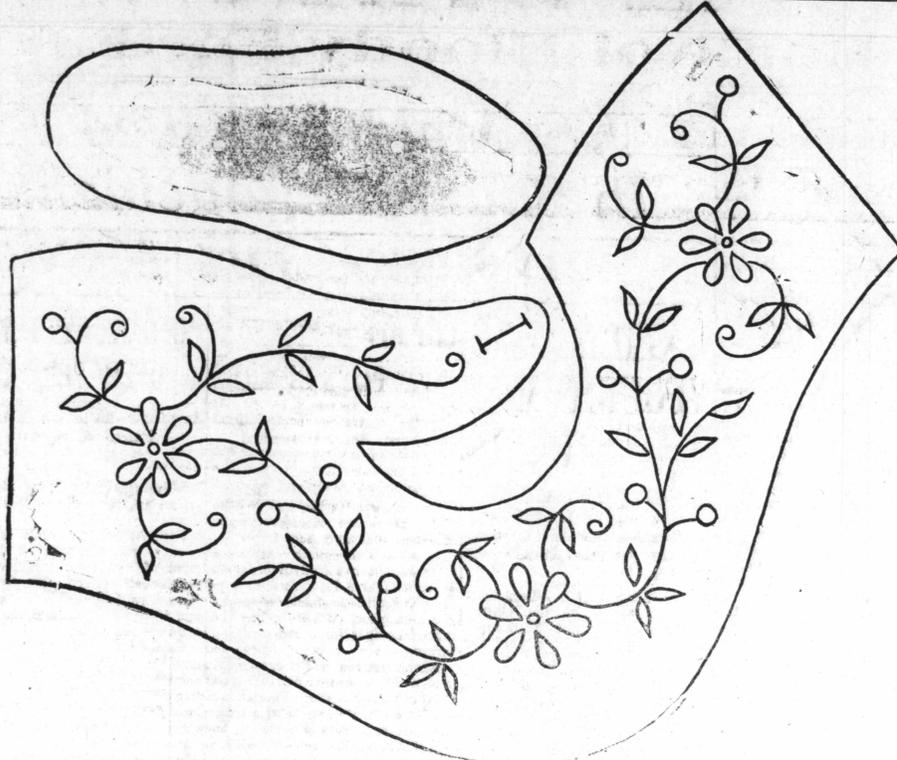
Steadman inspected him thoughtfully from head to foot and back to the head again. Then he smiled appreciatively, and held out a fist that was like a chunk of mahogany.

"You'll do," he said. "But I can't quite understand why you're going second in sail with an extra ticket. Leigh—Leigh? I seem to remember the name."

"I shouldn't be surprised if the rea-

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son's the same as the one that keeps you mate here, sir, when you might have been skipper of a liner years ago." Leigh laughed, and his strong teeth flashed white. He was a smart, tall youngster, hard as nails, with something of refinement in his face not always present in sailors' faces. Once again Steadman peered at him.

"You mean Aileen?" he asked, and Leigh nodded thoughtfully, with that same red flush through the sunburn.

"Come to think of it, you're the youngster who helped her stowaway three years and more ago. She told me—in confidence. No need to Captain Curzon, though. He mightn't mind, but then, on the other hand, he might. Yes, the girl's coming the voyage, so you needn't worry. Come down to my room and have a smoke."

"Half a minute, sir." Leigh was a keen young officer, and hours of stiffness had set his every sense aching for the comfort of tobacco, but there was a duty to be fulfilled. "There's a consignment of spirits come down just now, and there doesn't seem to be any room for it aft. We might break out the cargo and restow, but it'll be a long job. I half thought of putting it down the fore, but—then it's pretty near the sailors' quarters, and might tempt them to broach cargo. And that means the very deuce."

"We'll put it down the fore," said Steadman, after a close survey of the hatches. "No need to alter the ship's trim at this time o' day. Besides, who's to know there's spirit forrard? Not a drunken crowd of swabs who join at the last minute, anyway. Have it forrard, and see it stowed yourself—when we've had our smoke." And Mr. Steadman made the greatest mistake in his career in this apparently unimportant decision. Also, since it is an irrefutable law of Nature that all mistakes shall be paid for, this was paid for to the uttermost farthing, not only as concerned the mate, but others whose fate was closely intertwined with his. However, at the moment, no presentiment of what the future held was vouchsafed either to Steadman or Leigh. The mate brushed a streak of dust from his pilot-cloth trousers and removed his hard felt hat as the two entered his cabin under the poop.

his hand with generosity towards a whisky bottle that stood on the table. "Have a drink?"

"No thanks—feetotaller. Yes, sir, I suppose that will be the best way. Now, Mr. Steadman, you seem to know who I am, so I suppose Miss Curzon's

been talking. You're sure she's coming?"

Steadman once more eyed him gravely, and then shook his head. "Yes, she's coming, my son; but—Aileen's not like some women. She's more a sailor than the half of these

dock-rats we get in ship's forecastles to-day, and she's married to the sea.

"Understand?"

"Yes, I think so. Well, judging from what she told me about you, there are worse things than being just near to her. So I'll stop, if you've no objec-

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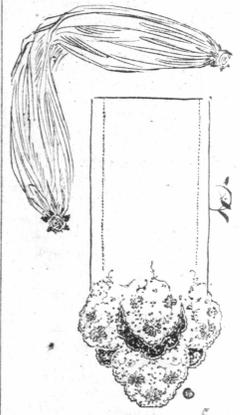
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tions."

Mr. Steadman had no objections; rather to the contrary, in fact. He seemed to have taken a sailor's quick liking for the young fellow who sat opposite him in the dingy room, and said as much.

"This isn't a bad ship for a youngster," he went on. "The old man's a gentleman. That counts for a good deal in a ship's management. While as for Aileen,—well, there's no word for her. She's as good as a fair wind in the doldrums."

Thereafter the conversation became peculiarly ship-like, dealing with prospects of passages, with details of stowage, with the general downward trend of the British mercantile marine—an everfruitful topic. But as Steadman left the main course at times to tell of how Aileen did this and did that, painting the girl's escapades with a loving touch, Leigh said in his inner heart that he had chosen wisely.

(To be continued)

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