The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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[CONTINUED.]

"What?"

"Oh, there ain't much to say. This is the lady we brought aboard last night—that's all."

"Who gave you permission?"

"Nobody. There wasn't time."

"There wasn't time, eh? Which one of you conceived the novel scheme of stowing away ladies in your cabin? Whose is she? Quick! Answer me." Indignation was vibrant in his voice.

"Oh!" the girl cried, her eyes widening darkly. She stood slim and pale and slightly trembling.

His words had cut her bitterly, though through it all he had scrupulously avoided addressing her.

The captain turned to Glenister, who had entered and closed the door.

"Is this your work? Is she yours?"

"No," he answered quietly, while Dextry chimed in:

"Better hear details, captain, before you make breaks like that. We helped the lady side step some sailors last night, and we most got left doing it. It was up to her to make a quick getaway, so we helped her aboard."

"A poor story! What was she running away from?" He still addressed the men, ignoring her completely till, with hoarse voice, she broke in:

"You mustn't talk about me that way. I can answer your questions. It's true—I ran away. I had to. The sailors came after me and fought with these men. I had to get away quickly, and your friends helped me on here from gentlemanly kindness, because they saw me unprotected. They are still protecting me. I can't explain how important it is for me to reach Nome on the first boat, because it isn't my secret. It was important enough to make me leave my uncle at Seattle at an hour's notice when we found there was no one else who could go. That's all I can say. I took my maid with me, but the sailors caught her just as she was following me down the ship's ladder. She had my bag of clothes when they seized her. I cast off the rope and rowed ashore as fast as I could, but they lowered another boat and followed me."

The captain eyed her sharply, and his grim lines softened a bit, for she was clean cut and womanly and utterly out of place. He took her in shrewdly, detail by detail, then spoke directly to her:

"My dear young lady, the other ships will get there just as quickly as ours, maybe more quickly. Tomorrow we strike the ice pack, and then it is all a matter of luck."

"Yes, but the ship I left won't get there."

At this the commander started and, darting a great, thick fingered hand at her, spoke savagely:

"What's that? What ship? Which one did you come from? Answer me."

"The Ohio," she replied, with the effect of a hand grenade. The master glared at her.

"The Ohio! Good God! You dare to stand there and tell me that?" He turned and poured his rage upon the others.

"She says the Ohio, d'ye hear? You've ruined me! I'll put you in irons—all of you. The Ohio!"

"What d'ye mean? What's up?"

"What's up! There's smallpox aboard the Ohio! This girl has broken quarantine. The health inspectors bottled up the boat at 6 o'clock last night. That's why I pulled out of Unalaska ahead of time, to avoid any possible delay. Now we'll all be held up when we get to Nome. Great Heavens! Do you realize what this means—bringing this hussy aboard?"

"I'll put you in irons—all of you"

His eyes burned, and his voice shook, while the two partners stared at each other in dismay. Too well they knew the result of a smallpox panic aboard this crowded troop ship. Not only was every available cabin bulging with passengers, but the lower decks were jammed with both humanity and livestock all in the most unsanitary conditions. The craft, built for 300 passengers, was carrying triple her capacity. Men and women were stowed away like cattle. Order and a half tolerable condition were maintained only by the efforts of the passengers themselves, who held to the thought that imprisonment and inconvenience would last but a few days longer. They had been aboard three weeks, and every heart was aflame with the desire to reach Nome—to reach it ahead of the pressing horde behind.

What would be the temper of this gold frenzied army if thrown into quarantine within sight of their goal? The impatient hundreds would have to lie packed in their floating prison, submitting to the foul disease. Long they must lie thus, till a month should have passed after the disappearance of the last symptom. If the disease recurred sporadically, that might mean endless weeks of maddening idleness. It might even be impossible to impose the necessary restraint. There would be violence, perhaps mutiny.

The fear of the sickness was nothing to Dextry and Glenister, but of their mine they thought with terror. What would happen in their absence, where conditions were as unsettled as in this new land, where titles were held only by physical possession of the premises? During the long winter of their absence ice had held their treasure inviolate, but with the warming summer the jewel they had fought for so wearily would lie naked and exposed to the first comer. The Midas lay in the valley of the richest creek, where men had schemed and fought and slain for the right to inches. It was the fruit of cheerless, barren years of toil, and if they could not guard it they knew the result.

The girl interrupted their distressing reflections.

"Don't blame these men, sir," she begged the captain. "I am the only one at fault. Oh, I had to get away! I have papers here that must be delivered quickly." She laid a hand upon her bosom. "They couldn't be trusted to the unsettled mail service. It's almost life and death. And I assure you there is no need of putting me in quarantine. I haven't the smallpox. I wasn't even exposed to it."

"There's nothing else to do," said Stephens. "I'll isolate you in the deck smoking cabin. God knows what these madmen on board will do when they hear about it, though. They're apt to tear you to shreds. They're crazy!"

Glenister had been thinking rapidly.

"If you do that, you'll have mutiny in an hour. This isn't the crowd to stand that sort of thing."

"Bah! Let 'em try it. I'll put 'em down." The officer's square jaws clicked.

"Maybe so; but what then? We reach Nome and the health inspector hears of smallpox suspects, then we're all quarantined for thirty days; 800 of us. We'll lie at Egg island all summer while your company pays five thousand a day for this ship. That's not all. The firm is liable in damages for your carelessness in letting disease aboard."

"My carelessness!" The old man ground his teeth.

"Yes; that's what it amounts to. You'll ruin your owners, all right. You'll tie up your ship and lose your job, that's a cinch!"

Captain Stephens wiped the moisture from his brow angrily.

"My carelessness! Curse you—you say it well! Don't you realize that I am criminally liable if I don't take every precaution?" He paused for a moment, considering. "I'll hand her over to the ship's doctor."

"See here, now," Glenister urged. "We'll be in Nome in a week—before the young lady would have time to show symptoms of the disease, even if she were going to have it—and a thousand to one she hasn't been exposed and will never show a trace of it. Nobody knows she's aboard but we three. Nobody will see her get off. She'll stay in this cabin, which will be just as effectual as though you isolated her in any other part of the boat. It will avoid a panic—you'll save your ship and your company—nobody will be the wiser—then if the girl comes down with smallpox after she gets ashore she can go to the pesthouse and not jeopardize the health of all the people aboard this ship. You go up forrad to your bridge, sir, and forget that you stepped in to see old Bill Dextry this morning. We'll take care of this matter all right. It means as much to us as it does to you. We've got to be on Anvil creek before the ground thaws or we'll lose the Midas.

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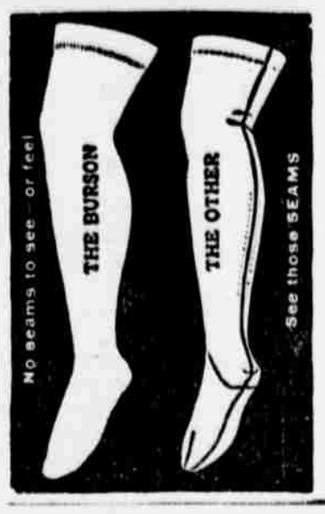

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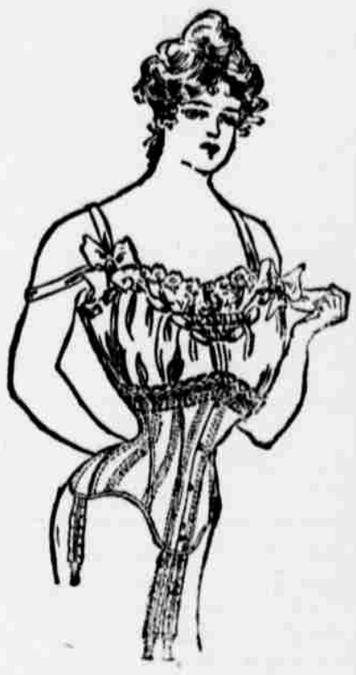

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