

THE COMMANDER OF
THE "HIRONDELLE"



W. H. FITCHETT

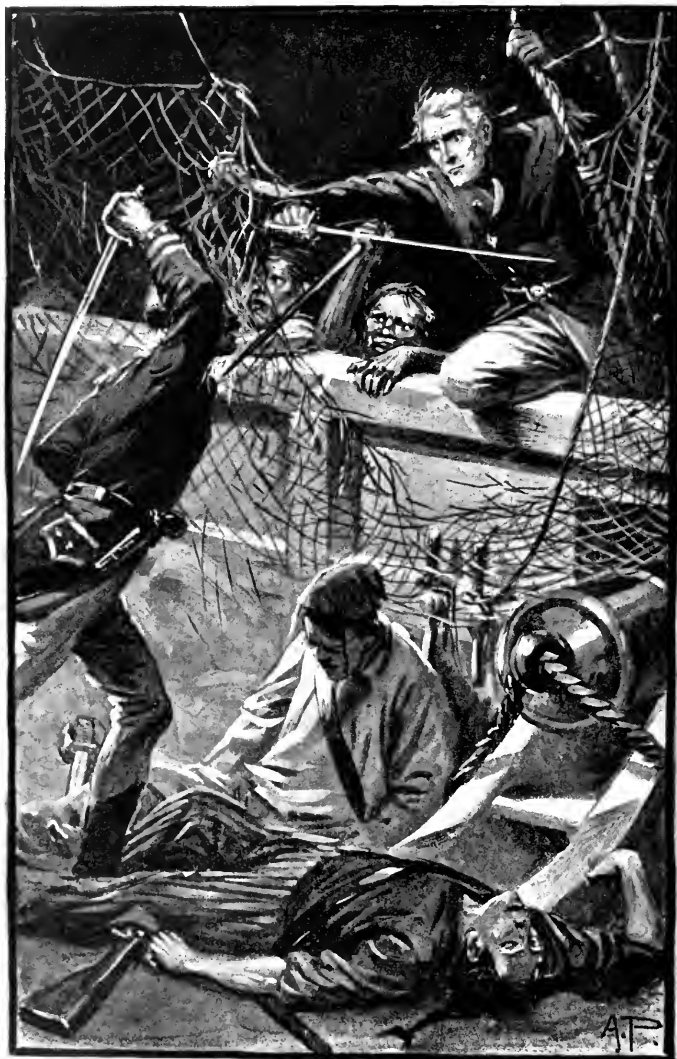


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THE COMMANDER
OF THE
“ HIRONDELLE ”

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"CAPTAIN GIRON RAN UP, CUTLASS IN HAND"

Frontispice

See p. 188

THE COMMANDER
OF THE
“HIRONDELLE”

BY

W. H. FITCHETT, B.A., LL.D.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON

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THE COMMANDER OF THE “HIRONDELLE”

CHAPTER I

IN THE ADMIRAL'S CABIN

‘ Who hath desired the Sea ?—the sight of salt water unbounded—
The heave, and the halt, and the hurl, and the crash of the
comber wind-hounded ?

The sleek-barrelled swell before storm, grey, foamless, enormous,
and growing—

Stark calm on the lap of the Line, or the crazy-eyed hurricane
blowing ?

“ Who hath desired the Sea ?—the immense and contemptuous
surges ?

The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bow-
sprit emerges ?

The orderly clouds of the Trades, and the ridged, roaring
sapphire thereunder—

Unheralded cliff-haunting flaws, and the headsails' low-volleying
thunder ? ”

—KIPLING.

LIEUTENANT HARRY GAUNT was leaning on
the bulwark of the flagship, looking with dis-
contented eyes on the scene before him. His atti-
tude was curiously listless for so smart a seaman,
and the scene was hardly one on which a sailor of

that day might be expected to look with any want of interest.

It was a late September afternoon in 1796, and eight great line-of-battle ships—five of them three-deckers—were under easy sail off Toulon. The wind was from the south, and the huge ships, in bulk resembling haystacks afloat, were rolling with slow majesty in a beam sea, as they stood to the east. They formed the outer division of the fleet of Sir John Jervis, keeping guard outside Toulon. The ships were painted black, with yellow checkers, and their lines would hardly have satisfied a modern eye. Half a century earlier, a British three-decker with its square, high stern—heavy with galleries, and crowned with a towering poop—in contrast with its low, projecting head, resembled a camel with its hump shifted too far back, and set on its tail. The ships we are describing were not quite so remote from the modern type, yet they were still high-sterned and bluff-bowed. They *butted* the seas, instead of cutting through them with sharp stems. But their tall masts, their breadth of beam, and their wide spread of canvas gave them an aspect of mingled stateliness and strength.

That stately procession of sea-giants was, as a matter of fact, the most formidable fighting force the sea at that moment carried. It was destined not four months later to win the great fight off Cape St. Vincent. The flagship which led the slowly-moving line, and on whose quarter-deck Lieutenant Gaunt stood, was the *Victory* of 100

guns, the most famous ship on which the sea winds ever blew—destined to outlast in fame the *Golden Hind* of Drake, or Anson's *Centurion*! It was to carry Nelson's flag at Trafalgar!

The lee division of the fleet consisted of five seventy-fours, with another historic ship—the *Culloden*, under Troubridge—leading. These ships were thrust with cool audacity almost into the very throat of the French harbour. They traversed, with the ordered regularity of so many gigantic sea-sentinels, the narrow space betwixt Cape Septet and the Hyères. As the head of the moving line reached the furthest point of its course, and fell off on its return track, the shore batteries broke into a sudden splutter of wrathful fire. And it was a point of honour for each ship, in turn, as it followed its leader, and went about, to go as near the angry French guns as possible.

The British line thus swung, pendulum-like, from one patch of exploding French batteries to another, and was majestically indifferent to both. "Troubridge keeps the French batteries in a constant blaze," wrote Jervis, with a certain sardonic relish. The French shooting, it is only fair to say, was of a very villainous quality.

Seaward, the leaning royals of a frigate gleamed white against the sea-line; to leeward were the French hills, green in the foreground, faintly blue in the distance. At one point the hilly background sank, and a cluster of church spires, showing against the skyline like a bundle of spear-points, marked

where the city stood. It was one of the long-enduring blockades of the Great War, without parallel in sea history. For nearly a year those yellow and black ships had already kept their relentless watch, through all weathers, over the great French port. The blockading fleet thrust out long tentacles west and south, and formed an iron net stretching from the southern coast of France to the eastern coast of Spain; a net through which only the smallest fish—a wandering polacre, a shy and swift privateer—could pass.

The flagship which led the outer line had just gone about; the next ship in the line, the *Barfleur*, was following. At her stern swung a transport, dingy with sea-travel, and deep with cargo. The boats of the *Barfleur* were veered on either side of the transport, and rose and fell with the waves, while busily employed in taking in stores. Each boat, as it was filled, was hauled ahead, and discharged its freight into the *Barfleur*. This was the grim old admiral's way of victualling the fleet. No ship left the line, but took in supplies while on patrol, so to speak. The open sea had to serve as dock and port for the fleet under Sir John's flag; he patched, and painted, and even caulked his ships, while they were tirelessly swinging to and fro in front of the enemy's port.

This was the process which Gaunt was watching, with an air of remote and detached interest, when a smart midy came up, touched his cap, and said briefly,

"Admiral wants to see you, sir."

Gaunt looked up, surprised. Sir John Jervis was not apt to "want to see" a junior lieutenant—a supernumerary into the bargain; but the summons must mean that for which Gaunt was just then hungering—work. With the thought, his face lit up, and he ran down the companion-way, passed the marine at the door, and with a respectful knock entered the admiral's cabin.

The cabin was low and dim: so low that a very tall man could hardly stand upright in it, and dim in spite of two open, square ports, through which the light of the September afternoon sun was streaming. A 32-pounder opposite each port, its muzzle turned inward, had a grim suggestiveness. Aft, the sloping angle of the stern was visible, and a half-open door showed the railing, which protected an outer gallery. Admiral Jervis sat at a massive table; his secretary was busy writing behind him at a smaller table.

Sir John looked up at Gaunt as he entered, and his shrewd eyes ran keenly over the young seaman's figure. They were the eyes of a born commander of men, choosing an instrument for a difficult task. Young Gaunt, somehow, felt this, as if by instinct, and a thrill of expectation ran through him. And yet the old admiral's eyes had in them a half-humorous gleam which puzzled him.

The face of Sir John Jervis, it must be confessed, was hard and unprepossessing. If there was intelligence in the wide curve of the great eyebrows, there was temper in the pendulous lower lip. The angle of

the nose, the squareness of the brow, with its deep-ploughed lines of care and authority, gave the whole face a curious aspect of granite-like strength; while from beneath those arched and shaggy eyebrows looked eyes of steel. Yet, into even those relentless eyes stole sometimes a spark of arid humour, and sometimes—though more rarely—a gleam of human kindness.

"Gaunt," said the admiral, "I have a bit of work that needs something more than seamanship and pluck; it needs brains. And I think you are the lad for it."

A gleam of half-cynical humour shone again, for a moment, in the old admiral's eyes, as he saw young Gaunt's face flush at the compliment; a compliment from such iron lips! The admiral let his eyes wander afresh over the figure of the young sailor with a certain relish of approval. Certainly, young Gaunt was the ideal of a seaman. He was above the middle height, with an indescribable air of mingled activity and strength. The grey-blue eyes were in startling contrast with brow and cheek, brown with sea winds and tropical suns. His firm lips, as they smiled, showed his clean white teeth. There was daring in the frank look, coolness in the steady eyes; decision in the clear-cut lips. He was a sailor every inch; yet he was something more. Beneath the clear brows the grey eyes had a flash of hawk-like keenness; every line in the face was expressive of alert intelligence. Plainly, Gaunt was an officer of quite unusual promise and character.

"You led in the cutting-out of the *Sybille* at Martinique?"

"Yes, sir," answered Gaunt.

"Any other officer in His Majesty's service could have done that," observed Sir John ungraciously; "and you let that Frenchman take the *Hirondelle* out of your hands, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Gaunt, with compressed lips.

"Well, the court-martial cleared you. You came cleverly out of Trichon, too, and the information you brought was worth something. You are a Channel Islands man, and smart at boatwork, and know French well?"

"Yes, sir."

Sir John's eyes dwelt shrewdly on the young sailor afresh.

"The *Hirondelle*," he said, "is the quickest French keel afloat; and, though Captain Giron is a scamp, he is as smart a seaman as they've got under the Tricolour. Now, the *Hirondelle* made a dash out of the port the other night, but the *Romulus* headed her off to the east, and she ran into Trichon, where the frigate is keeping watch over her. But I can't spare a frigate to blockade a brig—even so smart a brig as the *Hirondelle*. Besides, I want to catch the brig. She carries despatches for Martinique, and I must have them. If he gets an opening, Captain Giron will make a push for the sea, and I will give him an opening. I will call off the *Romulus* and leave the door open for the Frenchman. But, Gaunt, you must catch him! The *Emerald* has

brought in a decent lump of a schooner, looking as French as they are made. I will give you command of her, and you must catch the lively *Hirondelle* and her scamp of a captain. I will back a British sailor's wit and seamanship against any Frenchman's. And you would like to weather on that particular Frenchman, Gaunt?" said Jervis, with a look of sardonic humour.

Yes; to capture Captain Giron and his brig was, just at that moment, the business beyond all others which Lieutenant Gaunt would have chosen. The chance of doing it sent fire to his eyes, and set every nerve in his body tingling. Captain Giron was the one Frenchman whom Gaunt remembered with a certain fury of anger quite rare to his cool and chivalrous temperament.

The *Hirondelle*, a fast and mischievous French privateer, had been caught embayed on the coast of Cuba, by the *Ariadne*, a British frigate, and captured almost without a shot being fired. Gaunt, the frigate's second lieutenant, was sent home in the prize, with despatches, and Captain Giron, with part of his crew, was left on board. He had given his parole, and was not, like his crew, under guard. But Gaunt disliked and suspected the Frenchman, and kept a keen watch over him.

When east of the Azores, the brig was caught in a furious gale, and only by perfect seamanship was kept afloat. When at last the gale had blown itself out, Gaunt, who had been thirty-six hours on duty, turned in exhausted, leaving his second officer and

chum, Lieutenant Brett, in charge. He was awakened to find the prisoners had risen and seized the brig and his officer had been thrown overboard, and the brig was once more in the hands of the Frenchmen. It was a feat of singular address and daring; but Captain Giron had broken his parole, and the circumstances of poor Brett's death showed it was nothing less than a murder.

The loss of the brig had for Gaunt every element of bitterness. It stung his pride; it clouded his career; it shocked his sense of honour. He remembered his dead chum—not much more than a lad in age—with a sort of unforgetting remorse. Captain Giron, on his part, took his success with an insolent glee which Gaunt found intolerable. He was a Frenchman of the evil revolutionary school, an adroit and daring seaman, but without scruple or honour. He mocked Gaunt for the simplicity with which he had trusted his parole, and told the story of how the gallant but unfortunate second officer had been surprised and killed, with a gleeful relish which filled Gaunt with silent and long-enduring fury.

Captain Giron, having recaptured his brig, took no risks. He put Gaunt and the survivors of the British prize crew in irons, and carried the *Hirondelle* safely into Toulon. Gaunt landed a prisoner. He had refused to give his parole, and, after some months of confinement, had effected a singularly daring escape from Toulon. He seized a boat at Trichon, a little fishing inlet some thirty miles east of Toulon, and reached the British fleet.

A court-martial acquitted him for the loss of the prize. But his career was broken. His life was spoiled, for the cloud on his professional career seemed to destroy the secret and dearest hope of his life—the hope of winning the woman he loved.

And now as he stood in the admiral's cabin there was put into his hands, in the most unexpected fashion, the opportunity of doing the one thing which would avenge his slain comrade, restore his own career, and give him back at a stroke everything he had lost. It was the chance of defeating the man who had tricked him; of bringing back to the British flag the very craft—and his cheek burned at the recollection—which had been lost to that flag while under his command. Yes! if wit, and seamanship, and pluck could achieve the feat, Gaunt would make things equal with Captain Giron.

All this ran through his brain as if in a stream of fire; then he was conscious that Sir John was again speaking.

"It is not a case of cutlass and guns, but of brains, and I think you have got the brains, Gaunt. Now, I will give you *carte blanche*. Captain Calder will let you have what men and material you want; I will call off the *Romulus* as soon as you have got your craft ready. Will you tackle the job?" asked Jervis abruptly.

"Certainly, sir."

"Well, don't bungle it. I must have the *Hiron-delle*, and I must have those despatches. Captain Calder has his orders. Go on board the schooner

and see what she wants, and report to me to-morrow afternoon."

Gaunt's quick brain had already been at work. "May I have young Litton, sir?" he asked. "He is——"

"Arrange with Calder," said Jervis irritably. "You have carte blanche. But, mind! I must have the brig and those papers."

As Gaunt stepped on deck, his blood dancing with exultation, he caught sight of the schooner he was to command rolling to leeward of the *Victory*. She had a certain air of sea-damaged smartness, but she was dingy, sea-battered, with stumpy masts and stained canvas. Many a trickle of rusting iron was scribbled over her sides. And with that untidy-looking craft, that carried no heavier metal than 6-pounders, he was to capture the smartest French brig afloat, with Captain Giron in command! But, as the admiral had said, it was a contest of brains, a duel of wits; and the keenest wit would win.

Gaunt's first business was to get a chart, and, going into his cabin, he spread it out and studied the scene of the coming adventure.

He had known for some days that the *Hirondelle* was cooped up in the little fishing inlet whence he had himself made his escape, and the odd circumstance that his lost prize was lying so near, and in a spot so familiar to him, had set his keen brain plotting schemes for her capture. And these schemes crystallised into definite shape as he listened to the admiral's words.

The *Hirondelle*, it was certain, would seize the first chance of running out to sea; her course would probably lie south-west, to the straits. Gaunt knew Captain Giron's craft and seamanship, and, putting himself in imagination inside his enemy's brain, he looked at the problem with his enemy's eyes, trying, in this way, to guess his plans. As he did this, the puzzle by degrees grew luminous. He read the Frenchman's strategy with a certainty which almost startled himself.

Then he plotted the counter-stroke, and every detail in turn grew clear to his seaman's brain. He had sat in his cabin, he presently discovered to his wonder, for two hours; but when he rose, his plan was mapped out with crystalline certainty and clearness.

As he stepped out of his cabin, a light-footed middy came running down the companion ladder.

"Litton," said Gaunt, with a curious hesitation, "I want you."

The lad paused, while Gaunt went on: "The chief has given me a bit of work, and I want a volunteer with me. Will you come?"

The lad looked up with a certain gleam of impertinence in his bright face.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Gaunt; but what is it?"

"I am to have command of the *Actif*, that schooner the *Emerald* has just brought in, for special service."

The lad smiled half-saucily. "I am none of your schooner midshipmen," he said. "I will stick to the flagship. You must carry the *Actif* to Portsmouth without me."



“IT’S A TOUGH JOB, AND A RISKY ONE TOO”

“But, Litton, I am not going to take the *Actif* into port. I am going to put salt on the tail of the *Hirondelle*. It is a tough job, and a risky one, too; but there's fun in it, and perhaps some credit. The chief has given me *carte blanche*; I am to pit my wits against the Frenchman's, and I want you, for the sake of old times, to come with me.”

The lad's face grew eager. Here was a mysterious adventure of unguessed dimensions; a Frenchman to be outwitted; a bit of actual fighting to be seen and shared. The boy's nimble imagination ran forward and pictured a whole procession of unknown chances; the excitement of success; the envy of the middies' berth.

“Oh, Gaunt,” he said, in his eagerness forgetting etiquette. “I'll go! You are a good fellow for giving me a chance. We'll bag that impudent Frenchman, right enough.”

Then he hesitated and flushed, and went on awkwardly, “I know the pater was rough on you, and I don't forget you saved my life on that cliff; and Irene does not forget it either,” he added slyly.

Gaunt smiled, a tolerant, elder-brotherly sort of smile, though a touch of colour came into his cheek at the mention of Irene's name.

“Litton,” he said, “you are a clever lad, and chatter French like a native; and I want a fellow with his wits about him, and that's why I take you.”

Litton grinned a smile of purest delight; his boyish chin was tilted at a still sharper angle with pride. Gaunt had won his middy!

When the two parted, Litton jumped into the rigging, and proceeded to study the *Actif*. "She's a lubberly beast," he admitted; with her tangle of loose rope-ends, and general air of slovenliness, she resembled a head of bristly, uncombed hair. Never mind! she would have British sailors on board, and they would quickly put an aspect of smartness on even the *Actif*.

Somehow, as Litton contemplated the dingy craft through the glowing lens of the coming adventure, and pictured Gaunt, with his cool brain and quick eye and infinite resource, on her deck, the schooner was transfigured. She grew interesting, formidable, almost smart! He felt he belonged to her, and had partnership in her coming fame. For so much does boyish fancy, pricked with the sense of imminent adventure, count!

CHAPTER II

SETTING THE TRAP FOR THE FRENCHMAN

“The sea is silent, the sea is discreet,
Deep it lies at thy very feet.”

—LONGFELLOW.

EARLY the next morning Gaunt stood in Captain Calder's cabin. That officer, a stout, apoplectic-looking seaman, read with knitted brows the list of requirements Gaunt presented.

“Sixty seamen, six 9-pounders, four petty officers, a middy’—young Litton—why you should want that young imp I can't guess! You are taking strength enough,” he grumbled; “you'll leave me a watch short. ‘A cutter, four boats, kegs of grey paint’—why, Gaunt, are you going to set up a paint-shop? ‘Lamps, duck-suits for the men’—and in this weather! It is to be a boat expedition, then, Gaunt! You are going to make a dash at the port, and carry the *Hirondelle* as she lies at anchor. Why, the batteries will smash you up!”

“I shall want all I have put down, sir,” said Gaunt quietly.

“Yes; and you will keep your own counsel, too, I see. Well, the admiral's orders are that you are to have all you want. I suppose I ought to be thankful

you don't requisition the flagship herself. I must make a draft upon some of the other ships," he continued, "for some of the hands you want."

Gaunt's plan, as a matter of fact, was clear in his own mind to the minutest detail. He had, in a high degree, a gift which is one of the best qualities of a leader—the gift of forecasting imagination; a faculty which enabled him to see, in clear succession, every stage of the adventure. Captain Giron would at first mistrust the disappearance of the *Romulus*. The inviting stretch of empty sea would seem to him an innocent-looking but deadly trap. Yet, with the first east or south-east wind he would make a dash. What course would he take? He might push boldly to the south-west, and to the open sea; and in that case the *Actif* would have no chance of bringing him to; still less of capturing him. The heavier metal of the *Hirondelle* would sink the schooner if it came to a fight.

There was another and more tempting course into which Gaunt proposed to inveigle his antagonist. A mile eastward of the inlet where the *Hirondelle* lay, was a long and straggling reef, a crooked spine of rocks, visible at low tide, and defining a clear but narrow channel which ran parallel with the coast for six or seven miles. The *Hirondelle* would make her dash at night; and Gaunt's plan was to bluff the Frenchman, by a display of menacing lights in the offing, into taking this channel. Once in it the *Hirondelle* must run east, under the coast-line, for a distance of over six miles, till a



"WHY, THE BATTERIES WILL SMASH YOU UP!"

cluster of splintered rocks was reached, through which, with a sharp curve, a narrow and deep channel led to the open sea. Beyond this cluster of rocks the main channel narrowed and shallowed into a *cul de sac*.

The leading features of the problem were thus quite clear. Only one who knew the coast well would attempt the channel at night-time. But Captain Giron knew it as he knew the palm of his own hand. He had used it again and again, as Gaunt had heard him boast, to trick his pursuers, or to evade blockade; and under the dark shadow of the high coast the brig would be invisible from the sea. When he found the direct course barred, the channel would certainly be an irresistible temptation to the Frenchman.

Gaunt's plan was to set the schooner aflame with lights in the offing as soon as he knew the *Hirondelle* was coming out; and so bluff his antagonist into taking the channel. The schooner's boats would lie concealed in the gap through the reef, so that the grapnels might be flung on the *Hirondelle* as she swung round to run through the narrow passage to the open sea.

Gaunt's local knowledge of the coast, derived from his experiences after he had escaped from Toulon, made all this clear to him. He had lurked for several days in the neighbourhood of Trichon, and at last seized and carried off a fisherman's boat, and made his way in her to the British fleet. He thus knew the coast almost as well as Captain Giron himself.

Gaunt, indeed, at this point of the adventure, was able, with a certain sense of humiliation, to guess why the shrewd old admiral had selected him for this particular task. It was not that he was quicker-witted than other officers, or had higher qualities as a leader. The work was entrusted to him only because he knew the ground as no other man in the fleet could know it; and because, as Jervis guessed, there was, in Gaunt's case, the spur of a keen resentment to quicken his zeal.

But it was necessary to the success of his trap that Gaunt should, somehow, make sure of knowing instantly the French brig moved from the inlet. His plan was to put young Litton ashore to keep watch over the *Hirondelle*, and signal to the schooner the first sign of its moving. The lad had wit, pluck, resource; and, thanks to his Channel Island nurture, could chatter French like a native. He would lie concealed during the day amongst the fallen rocks at the foot of the cliff, near the entrance to Trichon. At night he would steal to the edge of the cliff which looked down on the little harbour, and keep watch over the French brig.

If he heard clank of cable, flap of canvas, or saw any sign on board that she was about to stir, he was to flash an agreed signal, with a lantern he carried, from the seaward face of the cliff. A boat would lie every night in the offing, which would repeat the signal in turn to the schooner. Directly the flash of warning light was seen, the *Actif's* boats would push off to the gap in the reef, and lie there, in wait for

their prey; the schooner, meanwhile, showing lights enough in the offing for a big frigate.

Gaunt calculated that Captain Giron, stealing out from the harbour under cover of night, would see the lights of the schooner, and at once conclude that the *Romulus* was at her post again, or had been replaced, and the open sea was barred. He would instantly bear up east, and run down the channel to the narrow passage so as to turn the flank of the blockading frigate. But the schooner's boats would be already lying there, ready for their spring. As a detail of Gaunt's plan both the schooner and the boats were to be painted grey, so as to be invisible from the coast; and he felt almost amusingly confident that his trap would prove effective.

A couple of busy days were sufficient to fit the schooner—absurdly misnamed the *Actif*—for service, and on the afternoon of the third day Gaunt set sail for his cruising ground. Captain Calder had dealt generously with him, and his crew, he found, was made up of a very fine body of men, who looked upon the cruise as a holiday, with a delightful chance of fighting thrown in, and they accepted their crowded and narrow quarters with entire cheerfulness. And with the true instinct of a leader, Gaunt proceeded to take his men into his confidence.

He called the petty officers aft, and drew on the deck with chalk a rough plan of the coast, showing the channel and the narrow passage which led to the sea, and explained his whole plan.

The weather-beaten salts studied Gaunt's diagram gravely, but with an air of doubt.

"Why not let the boats go in and fetch the brig out?" asked Peters, the gunner's mate, the oldest of the group, a typical Jack Tar, with a fringe of black whiskers round his sun-browned face—like a sable nimbus which had, somehow, fallen from its proper position, and hung under his chin. "The men will do it, sir, right enough. That's the shortest way; and the shortest way is always the most convincing where a Frenchman's concerned. Let them try, sir," he went on, in a wheedling tone which Gaunt found very entertaining.

Peters was for straightforward measures. Why was it necessary to elaborately trick a Frenchman when it was quite as easy, and so much more expeditious, to take him by the scruff of the neck?

"I suppose," Gaunt replied, "the men would pull right into Toulon Harbour itself, if they were told to do it?"

"Well," said Peters, "in the starboard watch on board the *Victory* we have talked over that very plan, and we have concluded we could do it. Bless you, sir, the men are hot for it!"

"But there are fifteen line-of-battle ships in the harbour, and guns on every headland, too."

"Yes, yes," said Peters, "we know that. But if old Sir John would only say the word we would have the Frenchman out! As for the brig, sir, a couple of boats will do the business;" and Peters turned the quid in his cheek with an air of authority. "Won't

you let us go in, sir?" he asked in an anxious tone.

Gaunt laughed at the old seaman; he was a type of his class, half hero and half child.

"The batteries would blow you to pieces," he said, "and the Frenchmen are on their guard"—a statement to which the little group listened with an obstinately unconvinced air.

There were shrewd heads, however, under the tarpaulin-hats of that day. Johnson, the boatswain's mate, a tall north-countryman, and a sea-veteran of another type than Peters, had listened keenly to Gaunt's plan.

"No seaman, sir," he said, "let alone a Frenchman, would take his craft up that channel by moonlight if there was any chance of doing anything else. One set of lights in the offing mayn't bluff the Frenchman. Why not rig a bright light to the cutter's masthead, and let her lie a mile off from the schooner? It will look like two ships on guard instead of one."

"Thank you, Johnson," said Gaunt pleasantly; "that is a good suggestion, and perhaps we will improve on it."

He presently set the carpenter to rig up a floating light. The butt end of a spar was lashed into the head of a barrel and weighted so as to keep the spar erect; a lantern was fastened to the extremity of the spar, forming a floating beacon which could be dropped overboard from the schooner as soon as Litton's signal was seen. Thus, when the *Hiron-*

delle came out of the inlet, she would see three clusters of light scattered over a line of some miles ; and, in particular, the schooner would show lights enough to disquiet a less wary seaman than Captain Giron.

The petty officers in turn expounded the whole strategy to the Jacks forward ; and round the mess-kids that night there was much cheerful enjoyment of the fashion in which that particularly smart Frenchman, Captain Giron, was to be tricked and captured.

As for Gaunt, as he trod the little poop of his schooner, while she butted her slow way through the light sea that was running, he felt an exultant gladness in the task he had in hand. The moment for action was come, and he felt the warm blood tingle to his very finger-tips.

But presently the night, with its hush and darkness, and the solemn heights of stars above him, touched his mind to graver thoughts.

The seamen of those great and busy days were not given to be introspective ; they were not in the habit of scrutinising with anxious solicitude the motives behind their acts. Yet they had a certain simplicity and freshness of conscience not perhaps very intelligible to the modern temper. As Gaunt leaned against the taffrail of the *Actif* that night, his conscience thrust itself, unasked, as a disturbing force in the problem. He certainly felt a fury of angry zeal in this adventure such as he had never yet carried into any enterprise. Was he more passionately

eager to serve himself than to serve his country? He was going to risk the lives of brave men—his own and others’—in this business; was it merely for the sake of attaining a personal revenge?

Gaunt was no mere fighting animal, with the lust of combat running riot in his blood; loving battle for its own sake, and counting human lives—the lives of his own men or of his foes—cheap. War for him was duty in its most dreadful form. But it *was* duty! The sanctity which goes with duty justified and ennobled it; and to the doing of it Gaunt brought, not only his keenest wit and his utmost energy, but a perfectly easy conscience. But he felt, by an instinct which did not express itself in logic, but was stronger than logic, that he must not bring into so high a business personal and unworthy motives. And, for a moment, he tried the new adventure by this test.

“It is a bit of duty,” he concluded at last; “it is in the day’s work. I’ll do it in the spirit of duty. Hang Captain Giron and his tricks!”

And then Gaunt did what might seem to some a strange thing. He bowed his head in the dusky night air, with the listening stars above him, and he silently prayed. For the seamen of that day—as of all days—familiar with hardship, constantly at fingertouch with death, the most gallant of fighters—a simple, natural piety was not difficult. Their daily vocation put them in contact with eternal realities. The sea is to-day as it was on the First Day, when God drew the waters together, and bade the dry land

appear. Who touches it is in contact with one of the great primal realities. The wide spaces of lonely waters, the height of the star-filled heavens—the gleaming and divine chart by which he steered, all touched with subtle, if unconscious, force the deeper sensibilities of the sailor's nature. Nelson was the typical sailor of his age; and that unforgettable picture of him kneeling in prayer when drifting into the hell of fire of Trafalgar, represents one element in the character of the seamen of his day.

Gaunt, to his fine seamanship, his daring spirit, his quick intelligence, added a manly and unaffected piety which did not enfeeble these qualities, but rather gave them a finer temper. His piety, perhaps, had not much to do with theology. It was, so to speak, the music of Ken's Morning and Evening hymn translated into flesh and blood—with a dash of sea-salt added!

But now the moon had risen; every sound on the schooner was hushed; only the liquid, half-melancholy whisper of the breaking waves at the stem could be heard, and, under the magic of the hour, Gaunt's thoughts wandered into another realm—a fairy land of dreams and hopes very remote from the iron business of war.

CHAPTER III

A SAILOR'S LOVE-DREAM

“Oh, to be in England,
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough,
In England—now!”

“That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!”

—BROWNING.

THE wind sighed softly in the rigging; the white moon, as it hung in the quiet heavens, poured a flood of milky radiance on the heaving sea. It was a night to set a lover dreaming; and as he paced to and fro, Gaunt let his imagination dwell on young Litton's words, “I know the pater was rough on you; but I'll never forget you saved my life, and Irene doesn't forget either.”

A thrill of keenest feeling ran through him, as he whispered to himself, again and again, that name, “Irene! Irene!” The whispered syllables seemed to flood with music all the cells of his memory.

His imagination, at their bidding, turned artist, and drew in airy lines, as if on some mystic canvas, a girl's face—shy, sweet, proud, and like no other face on which Gaunt's eyes had ever looked. And with it came the scent of flowers, the sound of a thrilling voice—a girl's voice, clear and pure, yet inexpressibly soft, answering the call of a lark in the morning sky. He saw again the flowerlike face amid the flowers, upturned so that the sun touched with its light the soft brow, the dainty cheek.

Out of what chamber of heaven or earth did that vision come to him? While Gaunt leans dreamily on the taffrail of his schooner, the reader may be told the story of his love—though the tale is like a tiny and perfumed garden of sentiment, set in an arid landscape of war.

Gaunt was the son of a naval officer who was killed in the fight betwixt the *Fox* and the *Juno* off Brest in 1778. His mother took her widow's grief, and her son, a lad not four years old, back to her native place in Guernsey, and lived out her gentle and patient life there. The sea that edged the island with foam and sound; the ships that passed, like white shadows, across the skyline; all the forces of heredity, and all the magic influence of his environment, combined to make young Gaunt a sailor. By the time he was fourteen he was as weather-wise as a sea-gull, as much at home in the water as a duck, and he could sail a boat in any sea or weather.

His imagination was nurtured with the wild tales natural to an island community, set in the

swirling channel, half-way betwixt England and France, with the sliding topmasts of great ships always on the horizon. Tales of storm and adventure, of smugglers and of privateers, of chase and capture, of clever evasions, and of gallant fights. French became a second mother-tongue to the boy; and yet in face, temper, and build, no more perfect type of English boyhood could be found.

The Navy was the one inevitable career for such a lad as Gaunt, and at twenty-two he was the second lieutenant of a smart frigate, the *Ariadne*. After a term of active service in the West Indies the frigate was ordered home, and Gaunt, a devoted son, was spending his leave with his mother. Young Geoff Litton, one of the *Ariadne's* middies, the scapegrace and the favourite of the middies' berth, was the son of Sir John Litton, a wealthy London merchant, for whose family the great mansion on the hill which towered above the modest, flower-girdled cottage where Gaunt's mother resided, served as a country residence.

Gaunt spent the first days of his holiday in the luxury of lounging. It was the springtime. The orchards were a flame of colour; the hedges were ribbons of flowers; the hillsides mere slopes of emerald. The arched and azure sky was full of the song of birds. The perfume of spring was in the air; the pulses of spring-life stirred in the woody fibre of every tree.

Gaunt enjoyed it all with a sailor's delight in grass and tree and flowers; in the hum of bees,

the glowing scents of the hedges, and all the slow-beating life of the homely earth. The eye, wearied with the grey sea—with its measureless horizons and blowing winds, its episodes of storm and battle, and the long tedium of night watches—found a lazy and exquisite delight in the unchanging contours of the green hills, the odours of the peaceful earth, the intoxication of colour with which the coming spring splashed the wide palette of the landscape.

One morning Gaunt wandered down to the little stream that ran, and sang to itself among its water-cresses, at the foot of the hill opposite his mother's cottage. The orchards of the great Hall where the Littons lived stretched down the whole slope of the hill to the edge of the stream. A low, grassy embankment served as a fence to the orchard, and the blossoming pears and apricots thrust their branches over it, till their leafy shadows darkened the waters of the little stream.

Gaunt stood under the shadow of a great chestnut tree and drank in the delight of the scene—hum of bees, perfume of blossoming fruit-trees and of hawthorn hedges, the call of lark and thrush, the tinkle of running water. What with scent and song, sunlight and colour, Gaunt's every sense was intoxicated.

A tiny gap broke the grassy bank opposite, and an uncertain line of trodden grass showed where a path ran down to some scattered stepping-stones in the brook. A low, arch-like curve of fruit blossoms—pear or apricot, Gaunt's seagoing eyes could not

tell which—hung over the gap in the embankment through which the path ran.

As he stood, half-dreaming in the warm shade, Gaunt heard the voice of a girl coming through the garden. She was carolling softly, but with an inexpressible airiness and gaiety. The thread of silver sound was a new delight added to the feast regaling Gaunt's senses. Presently the song ceased. Had the singer gone? Gaunt, with every sense now keenly alert, was listening for the song to begin afresh.

Suddenly, framed in the arch of blossoms, he caught sight of a girl's figure. The sifted sunlight streamed through the shaken leaves and blossoms, and daintily touched with gold the rich hair, the line of the delicate brow, the curve of the exquisite cheek.

The girl, thus framed in blossom, was herself a human blossom; the flower-like face, the scarlet of the lips, the radiant eyes, the gleam of the white, column-like throat, the perfect lines of the slender figure—Gaunt's eyes dwelt in wonder on every detail. It was as if the soft, scented, many-tinted life of the spring, with its warm airs and wind-blown perfumes, had been suddenly translated into sex, and set before his eyes in flesh and blood—flesh and blood as soft as the air itself, as delicate as the tinted flowers, but thrilling with stranger forces than any which stirred in the blossoming trees.

Gaunt hardly knew whether his senses were not tricking him. The vision was so sudden! That girlish figure had come without rustle of branch or sound of footfall. It was as if the arch of blossoms

had waited, a living frame for a living picture; and the picture had suddenly painted itself, exactly in position, on the summer air!

But the doubt only lasted for a moment. Gaunt, with the quick and sure eye of a seaman, was reading every detail of the unconscious girl's countenance. The "music born of murmuring sound" had stolen, somehow, into that face! Gaunt did not know Wordsworth; and, as a matter of fact, that exquisite line was not yet written. But as his eyes dwelt on the girl's features, his thoughts anticipated Wordsworth. This was the Spring itself, with its glory of youth and colour and blossoming life, made suddenly visible.

But the girl—all unconscious of the keen grey eyes that watched her—was listening with slightly tilted face, on which the clear light fell. To what was she listening? For the call of what voice did she wait?

A lark was calling; the notes fell like crystals of music out of the sky—pure, faint, thin, far-off; a tiny thread of sound, but of such crystalline and exquisite sweetness, ending in one thrilling, sustained note, that the charmed ear hung upon it—hung

" . . . on the jet sustained,
Without a break, without a fall;
Sweet, silvery, sheer lyrical."

Nearer and nearer still came that bit of feathered music. Now, from a hedge somewhere near, a thrush—like some challenged prima-donna, jealous of a rival's song—began to sing.

The girl listened to thrush and lark with cheek bent slightly towards each in turn. Then, with a

voice which, to the enchanted senses of Gaunt, seemed sweeter than either, she began to answer them both. Her voice was low and rich beyond speech; her slender white throat was a human flute, a sweeter pipe than any silver flute ever blown by Apollo. Now, high and thin and silver-sweet, it mocked the lark; then, with fuller sound, but pure and clear in every trill, it answered the thrush—the thrush, with its three quick notes, mellow but high—challenging, triumphant, arrogant; then the slow, meditative pause, the exquisite change of key, the dying cadence—the girl rendered it all with a dainty and mocking skill which to Gaunt seemed magical.

Gaunt listened entranced. The three threads of sound mocked each other, ran together, parted; now high, now low, the sweet notes ran, weaving a web of tangled harmonies. The girl, Gaunt thought, had stolen the many-voiced music of the spring, as well as its scented airs and dainty colours.

Suddenly the girlish mockery of lark and thrush ended in a trill of laughter so merry, so full of the humour and the gladness of life, that song of lark or thrush seemed thin and inexpressive compared with it. The notes ran along Gaunt's nerves till, with the pure pleasure of it, he shut his eyes.

When he looked again the song was ended, the singer was gone! She had vanished in such soft-footed silence that no sound stirred with her going. The arch of spring blossoms still hung there, but the slender figure, and the face whose charm left the tinted blossoms bleached, had disappeared. Gaunt

was tempted once more to think that his senses had tricked him. Was it vision or reality?

But the vision had burnt itself on his imagination. He had only to shut his eyes and it all came back. The face, painted as though on some mystic canvas, was before him; his ears thrilled to the music of that matchless voice.

Then he came out of his dream, and began to translate the vision into earthly terms. He felt sure the girl he had seen must be the sister of that gay young scamp Litton. Yet in the tumult of his fancy he almost shrank from calling her out of the aerial realm, where his fancy had placed her, to common earth. For him, she was linked to the song of the lark, the crescendo of the thrush. He would never hear lark or thrush again without catching the music of the girl's voice. Scent of hawthorn, or white glory of blossoming trees, would, while he lived, bring back that dainty face—soft as a flower, yet with a richness of life in it which no flower ever knew. A sailor touched with love's magic has a hurry both of sentiment and of fancy which would leave an average poet breathless!

For the rest of the day Gaunt wandered betwixt the scented hawthorn hedges, haunted by that vision. Then by degrees a more human pulse crept into his imagination. This was no fancy-drawn embodiment of spring, with its flowers and songs; this was a living, breathing woman, a woman to be known and even—by Heaven's special grace!—to be won! And, at the thought, Gaunt stopped and thrilled afresh. What a

perfume to come into his life! Gaunt felt absurdly sure that those deep, clear eyes could shine with something brighter than even the spring radiance. That perfect voice, that mocked and rivalled the lark, could be the vehicle of more tender meanings than the lark's carol ever hid or uttered. Gaunt could imagine it made more divinely soft still with a girl's tenderness for her lover! And suppose *he* were that thrice happy lover!

It never occurred to Gaunt to ask himself whether the girl had seen him, and whether the discovery of his presence had not been the secret of her sudden disappearance. Yet that night, at the Hall, Irene drew her brother aside.

"Geoff," she said, "has your friend, Lieutenant Gaunt, who is to spend his leave with his mother, come over yet?"

"Yes; old Jack saw him arrive by the boat three days ago."

The girl's eyes, as a matter of fact, had caught a sudden glimpse of Gaunt as he stood in the shade of the great chestnut tree, with his head leaning against its rough bark, and his eyes shut. The girl's eyes ran quickly over the strong, clear-cut face—a sailor's face beyond doubt, browned with sea air and the heat of tropical suns, with an aspect of grave and almost stern command about it. Then she fled softly, biting her lips with vexation. Had the owner of that face seen her play the child? Irene bit her lips afresh, and a flush of vexed shame ran to her brow and cheek at the thought. The sailor's face was a subtle

and unconscious challenge to her womanliness; and she found herself dwelling on it with a persistency that surprised herself.

On the next Sunday Gaunt sat with his mother in the old parish church, trying with very imperfect success to forget that during the service he would probably see the girl of his vision again, and under other conditions. As it happened, the Litton household filled the great, square family pew a little in advance of that in which Gaunt and his mother sat. Sir John was there, florid and black-browed; Lady Litton, a gentle-faced woman, sat beside him, with her middy son—that young gentleman's brown face wearing an air of half-humorous demureness.

But Gaunt saw none of them. Irene sat on the other side of her mother, and his eyes saw none but her. It was a new face on which he looked; the light of the spring sun was not on it, but a radiance shining from some diviner source. The grave and tender eyes, the pure brow, the lines of the soft lips seemed to belong to another order of beings than the rude faces of peasants and fishermen and tradesfolk that filled the little church.

As the hymn began, Gaunt could hear the girl's voice flowing into it, a thread of purest music. It was answering, not to the call of the lark out of the morning sky, but the whisper of some mightier Voice. This was worship! The girl's soul was talking with God; and her face had the beauty of worship on it.

Gaunt felt, with an almost disquieting thrill, that not merely would the spring scents and flowers, the

call of lark or thrush, bring up this girl's face for ever to his imagination. That face was linked indissolubly for him to the majesty of the pealing organ and the harmonies of chanted Psalms.

And while he dreamed in this fashion, his eyes fastened on her, the girl, as though conscious of some subtle call, turned her head, and their eyes met. In spite of herself the girl's eyes were held. This was the face, with its air of daring and of command, she had seen in the shadow of the chestnut, and that had vexed her self-respect. But now the eyes, blue and keen, that looked on her, had in them a strange light, an unsyllabled message, that sent a flush to her cheeks. That first meeting of their eyes was, somehow, for both Gaunt and Irene, a memory and a bond. Irene felt, with a touch of panic, as if she never could escape from them.

As for Gaunt, he had a healthy and masculine freedom from self-consciousness. He did not stop to ask what the girl's eyes saw in him; he only knew that he had looked for one breathless moment into the girl's soul! There was no discord betwixt the vision and the place in which, at the moment, the vision came to him. It was as though he had looked into the cool depths and mysterious, far-withdrawn aisles of a temple.

Gaunt, it will be seen, had the unspoiled imagination of a sailor!

CHAPTER IV

THE AGITATIONS OF A LOVER

“ I send my heart up to thee, all my heart
In this my singing.

For the stars help me, and the sea bears part.”

—BROWNING.

GAUNT'S next meeting with Irene was of a somewhat sensational sort. At one point the hill overlooking the sea became a mere face of cliff, a perpendicular descent of a couple of hundred feet. To stand on the edge of the great cliff and look out on the grey sliding Channel, the far-off haze which hid France, and to feel the keen winds that blew on its crest, was an exhilarating experience. Gaunt was wandering lazily, and in a dreamy mood, up the shoulder of the hill one day. The wind, soft with spring warmth, but in rush and weight almost a gale, came out of the south.

As he came near the crest he saw two figures standing on it. One was young Litton, and Gaunt's heart quickened as he saw the other was Irene. A boy's cap of blue velvet, binding the rich mass of her hair, brought out, with almost startling effect, the vivid face, the perfect curve of the girlish brow, the dancing brightness of her eyes. She stood on the

edge of the cliff, her dress, blown back by the strong wind, defining her nymph-like figure, her eyes searching the horizon. Presently she walked along the edge with elastic step, a figure slender, yet womanly. Then, when she paused, the eager set of her face, the look of her eyes seaward, as though she were challenging the vague, far-off spaces—all made a new and long-enduring picture in Gaunt's memory.

But something on the face of the cliff at this moment drew the reckless midddy's attention. He pointed downward with a laugh. Gaunt could see, as it were, a challenge on the part of the boy as his head bent over the cliff; then, breaking from the touch of his sister's hand, the lad stooped and let himself down over the edge. Irene bent over, following him with her eyes, with every movement arrested, an image of intent, unbreathing anxiety, with wind-blown hair and dress, and hands clasped with a quick, involuntary impulse on her breast. So expressive was her attitude that it might have served as a model to some great sculptor for a statue of Concern. For years afterward a certain note in the sound of the blowing wind brought back to Gaunt's memory, in a sort of living fresco, the vision of a slender figure, an image at once of grace and terror, bending over the dizzy edge of a great cliff.

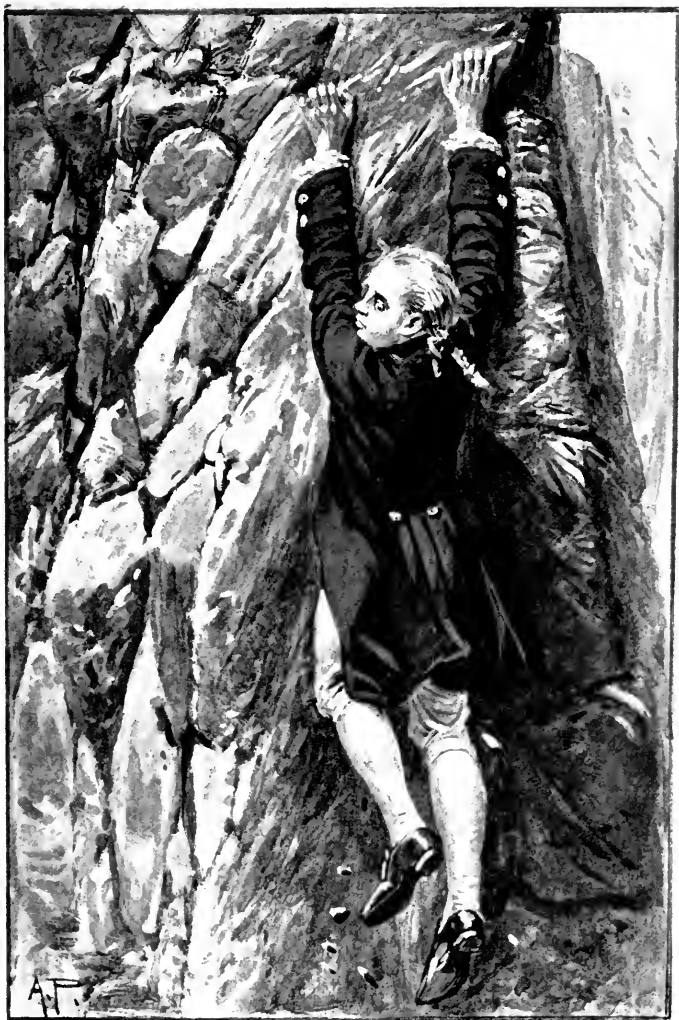
The moments went by, but the girl's attitude never varied. She seemed to bend over at last with yet keener anxiety; then her hands were suddenly flung out before her with a movement of distress so

expressive that Gaunt found himself involuntarily hurrying forward to her help.

Something had happened to the reckless boy. Irene hung over the cliff's edge as though she would cast herself down. Then she made another gesture of pain and terror so moving that Gaunt ran at speed. She heard the sound of his running feet and turned her head for a moment; but her glance went back instantly to the depths below; and in an agony of terrified appeal she pointed down.

Gaunt, when he reached the edge of the cliff, took in the scene with a seaman's eye at a glance. The lad had climbed down the rough face of the cliff to a tiny ledge a score of feet below, to pluck a cluster of flowers. It was a daring and not very wise trick; but to a middy who had raced his brother middies many a time to the truck of the *Ariadne*, and had hung on to the royals in a gale of wind, it was not an impossible feat, nor even one very difficult. The little ledge of weather-worn stone, however, had given way suddenly beneath the boy's foot, and he had slipped down a yard or two. It was the sight of that sudden fall that evoked the gesture of terror from Irene on the cliff summit. The surprise of the slip, the sound of the falling stones beneath him, had for a moment, indeed, shaken Litton's nerve.

He stared down with startled eyes. He could look with undizzied brain from the topsail yard of the *Ariadne*. The curve of the swelling sails, the interlacing tangle of stays and shrouds, the slanting rig-



“ HE STARED DOWN WITH STARTLED EYES ”

ging, the widespread yards, all broke the sense of depth with their familiar shapes. But here Litton looked down through 200 feet of empty air into the sea; and the crawling waters far below drew him with a deadly fascination. They seemed to rise up to meet him! He felt his brain swim!

It was an instant of real peril; but it was only an instant. Gaunt was thrilled with the appeal of the girl's single look; but one glance at the figure of Litton, clinging to the face of the cliff, with his seaward-bent eyes, told Gaunt's quick and trained senses the whole story. He sent his voice down the cliff as though he were hailing the maintop of the *Ariadne* in a cyclone. To Irene's ears his voice sounded harsh and threatening; there was authority, not to say rebuke, in every cadence of it.

"Hallo there! Come aloft, you young scamp! Do you want to go through the lubber's hole? *Ariadne's* maintop, ahoy! I'll masthead you."

The familiar voice, with its note of authority, acted as an instant tonic on the boy's nerves. It set him in familiar surroundings. Every nerve in his body responded automatically. He looked up! The deadly fascination of the beckoning sea was gone. His feet recovered their nimbleness, his hands their sureness. He was a middy again, quick-eyed, fearless, and active. In another instant he was scrambling up with monkey-like speed, and Gaunt accompanied each step with what may be called second-lieutenant admonitions; till, half-laughing and half-ashamed, the boy reached the summit.

"Oh, Geoff," said his sister, clinging to him with panting breath, "you frightened me."

Young Litton made no reply; his eyes were fixed on Gaunt. The habit of discipline had asserted itself; he was only a middy waiting to be mast-headed. And Gaunt would have sent him to any masthead at hand for a dozen watches, as a penalty for having frightened his sister.

"You young scamp!" he said sternly.

Irene looked at him resentfully. Who was this intrusive person, with peremptory voice, who talked to her brother as though he were some stray boy caught stealing apples? And Geoffrey, her audacious, irrepressible brother, seemed as if forgetful of her presence! He had eyes only for the stranger! He stood as if at attention, or waiting for orders!

Irene by this time recognised the figure she had seen under the chestnut tree. She had a grievance on her own account against Gaunt already; he had seen her playing the child. And now his offence was doubled! She drew herself together; and, in a moment, by some swift, inexplicable transition, she was no longer a sobbing girl, but a stately lady; and the touch of girlish dignity sat very prettily on her. Gaunt felt, somehow, that her brow was softly stern against him. The lieutenant in him disappeared; he became, at a breath, a despondent and inarticulate lover.

"I lost my head, sir," Litton was saying apologetically, and quite ignoring Irene, who felt herself dwindling into a mere girl again. She and Geoff,

she felt resentfully, were a mere pair of rebuked children. Then the lad suddenly remembered.

"This is my sister, sir," he said.

Irene's brow wore an aspect of dignified inquiry; so Litton went on.

"This is Lieutenant Gaunt, of the *Ariadne*, Irene;" and the lad said this with an air as if he were conferring a great distinction on his sister. Had he been introducing the Lord High Chancellor of England to the last "called" barrister, or the Archbishop of Canterbury to a curate newly hatched, he could hardly have been more impressive.

"I beg your pardon for interfering, Miss Litton," said Gaunt, "but I saw you were frightened."

"Oh yes," she answered, her cheeks growing pale again as she recalled the scene.

"I talked to him in that fashion—" Gaunt went on hesitatingly.

Here Irene suddenly froze again; Gaunt felt that, somehow, he hardly knew how, he had offended her.

"I had to pull the youngster together," he explained apologetically, "or he would have gone over."

But Irene looked doubtful, and Gaunt went off presently with the uncomfortable sense that he had blundered.

"So that is your hero, Lieutenant Gaunt," said Irene to her brother. "I can hardly admire his manners! Why did he talk to you as though you were nobody?"

"Well," said the lad gaily, "a middy is nobody

in the presence of a lieutenant. And, beside, Lieutenant Gaunt isn't like anybody else. There isn't a middy on the *Ariadne* that wouldn't jump if he spoke, and follow him anywhere if he gave the word."

"But," Irene protested indignantly, "it mortified me to hear you talked at in that tone."

"Well, Irene, it was just the thing I wanted. Didn't he know exactly what to do!" he went on admiringly. "His voice made me feel as if I were in the *Ariadne's* maintop, and could go anywhere."

"It was an easy way of saving you, to stand on the top and bully you," cried Irene indignantly.

"But it did the business," was the boy's reply, as though he were dismissing the whole subject.

The girl's imagination was not so easily soothed, however.

"Oh, Geoff," she cried tenderly, "I thought I should have died when your foot slipped! And, somehow, I knew the dreadful sea was pulling you down," and she clung to him with quivering lips.

"It's all right, Rene," said Geoff, with a boy's hasty and shy caress. "I was a donkey; but, no mistake, Lieutenant Gaunt saved me. And you didn't even say 'Thank you' to him! Why didn't you say it?"

"I to venture to say 'Thank you,' to the second lieutenant of the *Ariadne*?" replied Irene, in a tone of semi-humorous horror.

Irene was not sure whether she forgave Gaunt or not. Perhaps he had saved her brother. Yes! he

certainly had performed that feat; but it was in a way distressingly prosaic, and not in the least respectful. Then Irene recalled his face in church, and the look in his keen and masterful eyes. His awkwardness, too, on the cliff, was, to a girl's quick senses, very expressive. A shy, sweet sense of power crept into her maidenly consciousness; power over this too authoritative lieutenant, who ordered her brother about as if he were an errand boy, and whom Geoff himself, who respected hardly anybody, contemplated with admiring eyes as a sort of hero!

She drew Geoff on to tell tales of Gaunt; of his seamanship—"the best seaman afloat" was the boy's confident summary; of his pluck—how he led the boats in cutting out the *Sybille* in the West Indies; of his cleverness—how he bluffed the French line-of-battle ship, when in charge of a captured Frenchman, actually going on board of her with the papers of his prize, and persuading the Frenchman that he was the original owner, &c. A boy has a happy capacity for hero-worship; and on Gaunt young Litton was diffuse, interesting, and even eloquent; and Irene listened with an interest that half-startled herself.

A great dinner-party was given at the Hall a few days afterwards, and Gaunt was one of the guests. It was, for him, a memorable experience. He saw Irene in all the stateliness of evening dress; he heard her sing in her mother's drawing-room—though that trio with lark and thrush remained unapproached in sweetness.

At the dinner-table Gaunt sat beside Lady Litton. She was a meek-faced woman, with tired and gentle eyes and hesitating lips, who adopted at once her son's opinions about Gaunt, and received him with a sort of pale, reflected enthusiasm, as a hero. Gaunt found, however, that she used him chiefly as an opportunity for talking incessantly about that young gentleman himself, a theme on which, after the devoted fashion of all mothers, she never tired. And Gaunt scarcely recognised the reckless young scamp of the middy's cabin in the nimbus-crowned vision which Lady Litton offered to his admiring gaze. The boy, according to his mother's version, was a being almost too good for human nature's daily food, and her anxieties about him were manifold.

"Does dear Geoffrey, Lieutenant Gaunt—he was always so careless; but, you know, you can't teach boys some things; and then, wet feet are so very bad, you know, the very worst thing. There's poor Mrs. Smethwick—she never recovered from that. Her poor son! Sorrow does just kill some people; and her husband—ah, well!—we won't talk of that. And I bought him two dozen of the very best, and marked his name on them all with indelible ink; but when boys have no one to look after them—Does dear Geoffrey, Lieutenant Gaunt, *always* change his socks when they are damp?"

Lady Litton's conversational methods Gaunt found were peculiar. She introduced her subject with numerous preliminary digressions, and adorned it with many lateral excursions, rambling through a

wide range of topics, the main idea, or fact, making its belated appearance—like the lonely, late-arriving verb in a German sentence—at the very last, and when its very existence had been almost forgotten. All the bifurcating fragments of sentences had some relation to the main one, but a relation which was usually very obscure to the hearer.

Gaunt was unable to report anything as to the exact dryness or dampness of Litton's socks, and Lady Litton rambled gently on through new fields of anxiety.

“Dear Geoffrey!” she said regretfully. “Well, of course, no one is perfect; all boys have their faults. And, after all, if they are perfect to begin with, you know, Lieutenant Gaunt—and you can't make boys like girls; and I'm sure I don't want to. And look at Lady Clifford's boys; but”—she hurried on apologetically—“they are very good lads, too. I wouldn't speak ill of them. But dear Geoffrey is *very* careless about his meals; so *very* careless. And, you know, so much of a boy's health depends on the regularity of his meals. He would be late to breakfast, and I am sure the bells that used to ring. . . . But I suppose on the frigate the meals are very regular?”

Gaunt assured the anxious mother on this point as well as he was able, not dwelling on the circumstance that a midddy who was late for breakfast probably got none. And Lady Litton proceeded to introduce spirally, so to speak, other maternal anxieties.

Irene sat on the opposite side of the table, and Gaunt was troubled by the spectacle of a dashing-

looking officer, Major Ffrench, of the 42nd, who sat by her, with face turned constantly towards her; and up to whose daring eyes, and smiling lips, and the gleaming white teeth they showed, Irene's glance turned often, if very demurely. Gaunt felt himself drab-coloured and commonplace compared with that brilliant figure in scarlet and gold.

"A North Sea gale," he thought, half bitterly, "would take the colours out of that gay coat."

Yet sometimes Irene's eyes flashed a studious, questioning glance across the table to the sun-browned face of Gaunt; and that simple-minded seaman found himself watching for those arrowy gleams from eyes so bright, anticipating them, counting them, and trying to guess the girl's soul behind them; a very profitless exercise for the clumsy male intelligence!

On the other side of the table sat a gentleman, long and solemn-faced, who, through a pair of huge moon-like glasses, seemed to contemplate both Major Ffrench and Gaunt with equal disapproval.

"That," whispered Litton to Gaunt, "is my Uncle Inskip. 'Uncle Insects' we call him. He is a great entomologist, and he hates soldiers and sailors almost more than he loves beetles and cockroaches. He thinks fighting is barbarous, and all soldiers and sailors are savages. But he's a jolly good fellow for all that."

Yes, if looks were any proof, it seemed probable that "Uncle Insects" did include redcoats and blue-jackets, His Majesty's army and His Majesty's navy,

in one unqualified and comprehensive dislike. He glared at the Major and at Gaunt in turn as though they were insects of unlawful varieties, whom science must sternly decline to recognise.

After the ladies had withdrawn, "Uncle Insects'" opinions became loudly audible. His views were perfectly well known, and some one began to banter him on them. He was accused of being nothing else than a political Quaker.

"No," said "Uncle Insects," putting his fingers together with the air of a professor about to deliver a lecture, and gazing on the company through his huge spectacles, "I am no Quaker, political or religious. But I hope I am a civilised man, a scientific man. And war is the failure of civilisation; it is the despair of science. It will destroy them both. Every soldier represents the emergence of the savage," and he nodded agreeably at Major Ffrench. "I look on the whole machinery of war, and all its agents, as representing the breakdown of man's higher nature"—and he glared severely at both Gaunt and the Major.

"That's rough on you, Major Ffrench," said Sir John, with a loud laugh.

"I am sorry to incur your disapproval, Mr. Inskip," said Ffrench, "but would you have us dismantle our ships and dismiss our troops and let Napoleon land a French army in Kent without firing a shot?"

"He would not land, sir," said Mr. Inskip impressively; "the moral appeal of our disarmament would rouse the higher nature of our apparent antagonists."

"I would not like to risk our national existence on that chance," said Gaunt mildly.

"But I am prepared to risk it," said Mr. Inskip magnificently.

"But is resistance always wrong? If you found a burglar getting through your study window at midnight, wouldn't you seize the poker or call the police?"

"No," said Sir John; "Inskip would politely invite the burglar to help himself as far as his higher nature moved him to do so."

"You may laugh, gentlemen. There is no logic in a laugh. I never laugh on such a subject"—a statement perfectly true; for "Uncle Insects" was as destitute of humour as an owl, and as little capable of laughter about anything. "A great principle is not to be judged by such petty emergencies."

"But, Mr. Inskip," some one mischievously asked, "do your peace principles extend to the realm of science. I understand that you had a very animated debate with Dr. Wells on—what was it?—how many rings are there in the body of a lobster?—and the pamphlets betwixt you flew like bullets. Indeed, I heard—no doubt it was a scandal—that you very nearly came to blows."

"The question of the structure of the *crustacea*," said Mr. Inskip majestically, "is of great importance; and Dr. Wells was wrong; wrong in an intolerable and shameful degree"—and the very glasses of "Uncle Insects" gleamed with martial fire! "He betrayed science! He poisoned the fountain of

truth itself! He ought to be suppressed, and I did my best to suppress him."

The company roared at "Uncle Insects'" belligerent tone.

"You would fight for your insects," said Sir John, "but Ffrench here mustn't fight for his native land."

"It is a question of truth, sir," said "Uncle Insects" with dignity, "and truth is always sacred."

A political Quaker, a citizen who preached the duty of non-resistance and the wickedness of war, was not likely to find quarter at an English dinner-table in 1798, and Mr. Inskip had to undergo much robust badgering, a process which left him quite undisturbed.

His views, and the complacency with which he advanced them, amused Gaunt. Mr. Inskip, in a controversial mood, somehow suggested a sheep trying energetically to butt its opponents. If challenged, he would have said that he belonged to the school of Fox. Pitt's great rival did not write till nearly five years afterwards that foolish letter to Lord Grey, in which he tells how "the triumph of the French Government over the English affords me a degree of pleasure which it is very difficult to disguise." By multitudes the patriotism of Fox is still, though very unfairly, judged by that rash and unforgettable letter; but his name was already a label, and "Uncle Insects" understood, in some vague way, that it stood for opposition, not only to the particular war then raging, but, in fact, to all

wars, and so he adorned himself with it; but, as a matter of fact, he had no more political creed than one of his own beetles.

De Quincey, in his sketch of Dr. Parr, says that, even at the very end of the Great War, when the news of Waterloo reached England, "there were Englishmen to whom it was thought necessary by their families cautiously to break the shock of the tidings of that victory." These curious Englishmen believed that at Waterloo the wrong side had won! It seemed to them a moral disaster that the British squares had *not* crumbled to fragments before the rush of Ney's horsemen, and that Wellington, instead of Napoleon, had not fled from the field! "Uncle Insects" hardly belonged to this class. He would have anathematised *both* Wellington and Napoleon with equal energy, just as he would have denounced both Spartans and Persians in the pass at Thermopylæ, and Spaniards and Dutchmen on either side of the breach at Leyden, with austere impartiality! War was always, in his eyes, a crime; and everybody who took part in it was, by virtue of that act, a criminal!

Gaunt, however, looked at him with a sense of amused respect. It was an age when free speech, even in English air, was attended with many perils. England was under the yoke of the infamous Treason and Sedition Bills; the Habeas Corpus Act was in a chronic state of suspended animation. For whispering over his coffee-cup at his club the most harmless political platitude, a London doctor had been sent to

prison for two years ; a Nonconformist minister, who ventured to utter the same platitude in his pulpit, received a sentence of four years' imprisonment ; a Scottish barrister, for an offence no more serious, was transported for fourteen years. It was an age of hard laws and still harder judges ; and " Uncle Insects " put himself within reach of a prison cell by talking as he did, even at his brother-in-law's table, and Gaunt admired him for his courage, even while he smiled at his simplicity.

He realised, however, that " Uncle Insects," for all his oddity, was a great favourite in the Litton family, and he represented an influence hostile to him. The entomologist, indeed, glared at him every time he met him, afterwards, as if he spoiled the landscape, and was the mere " failure of civilisation " on two legs.

CHAPTER V

AN UNSYMPATHETIC FATHER

“My daughter!—O my ducats!—O my daughter!”

—SHAKESPEARE.

IN the golden days that followed, Gaunt met Irene constantly, and wandered with her brother and her along the foam-edged beach or betwixt the leafy hedges. He spoke no direct word of love to her; it needed, indeed, no words to explain the state of his affections. They were as open as the sky or the sea!

But it cannot be said that his love affairs wore a very prosperous look. He found Irene a sort of human kaleidoscope. She dazzled, chilled, perplexed him in turn. She was all moods—coy or gay, sweet or proud, frank or stately—in breathless succession. Now a demure and nun-like gravity rested on her, like a halo, or an atmosphere, beneath which—or out of which—shot sudden gleams of scorching humour. This vanished, and lo! there emerged a romp, a hoyden with flushed cheeks, mercury in her blood, and sunshine dancing in her eyes. Sometimes she was a frank and simple girl; then, at a breath, a grand lady, with pride on her lips and cruelty in her glance. Her quick wit outran Gaunt's more

sober intelligence, and played round it. She seemed to him, at times, like some shy, swift, rare bird, with dazzling plumage and proud, questioning eyes.

But in some rare moments moods fell on the girl which Gaunt was sure revealed her true nature—moods of soft tenderness and of womanly sense, when she seemed to move, sure-footed, in a world of grave and noble thoughts. But, girl or woman, jesting hoyden or soft-voiced maiden, she was alike charming to Gaunt.

After the foolish manner of lovers, he found, in every lightest act of his mistress—in the tilt of her eyebrows, the curve of her lips, the accent of her voice, in the fact that she smiled, or that she did not smile, in her ordinary coming and going—an alphabet of new and infinite symbols, an undeciphered language, with a grammar and syntax of its own, to which he could find no key. After walking, say, in the pleasant blossoming lane with her, he would sit down, in simple lover fashion, and try to spell out the meaning of each pretty gesture, or quick glance, or careless word.

“And everywhere he seemed to meet
The haunting fairness of her face.”

Gaunt, in a word, was caught, to his own amazement, in the swirl and eddies of a great passion. He was a simpleton, in the ancient, perennial, foolish, and happy fashion common to lovers of all ages and climes. With a French frigate under his lee, or fighting a gale in the Gulf of Lyons, Gaunt would

have had nerves of steel and a brain of ice. But love is a magician. Its whispers are spells! This keen-witted, hard-fighting sailor, a born leader of men, under the charm of a girl's face and the magic of a girl's eyes became a dreaming simpleton, the victim of unreasoning elations and of lunatic despairs. Love—it is alike, its sweetness and its folly—brings out the child in all of us.

Gaunt was, first and last, a sailor, and his temperament had about it a sailor's directness and ardour; yet he had spoken no words of open love to Irene. He was scarcely conscious, indeed, that he was wooing her; he was too busily occupied in the absorbing business of worshipping her! But there was a look in his eyes, a fire in his speech, that Irene found half-sweet, and, perhaps, more than half-alarming.

Each opened to the other, as a matter of fact, a new realm. He opened to her girl's vision a world of daring, of adventure in far-off seas, of conflict with Nature, of great duties bravely discharged. She opened to his charmed eyes the realm of a girl's pure thoughts and dainty imagination. His gravity and strength, the frankness of his brow, the look of unconscious command in his eyes, the law of truth and honour by which he lived, acted as a spell on Irene; while her perfect grace—the quick play of her thoughts, the shining and fathomless depths of her eyes—intoxicated Gaunt. For maid and lover are the complement of each other. She refined him; he gave strength and loftiness to her. And,

no doubt, love in her grew unconsciously. Gaunt felt, with a thrill of joy, that she looked at him sometimes with the smile of a girl on her lips, but the soul of a woman in her eyes.

Up to this point, fortune had been singularly kind to Gaunt. The field had been left clear to him. Major Ffrench had been called suddenly back to his regiment, which was under orders for active service; Sir John was absent in London; "Uncle Insects" was in eager pursuit of a particular variety of beetle, and had no thought to waste on merely human forms of life, especially on any contemptible variety clad in a red coat or a blue navy jacket. Gaunt had the field to himself. He loitered with Irene at the Hall, or rambled with her and Geoff through the shadowy lanes, at will. Suddenly Sir John returned from London, and Gaunt's golden age came to an abrupt close.

Sir John Litton was the last man in the world to see his daughter entangled with a nameless lieutenant, without money or influence. He was wealthy and ambitious; he moved amongst great people, and planned great things for his children.

Gaunt and Irene had parted one afternoon at the Hall gate, Irene's figure had just disappeared in a curve of the path, and Gaunt stood, following it with worshipping eyes, when Sir John came up briskly, and with an air of command. The great merchant's habits, both of thought and speech, were direct, blunt, peremptory.

"Lieutenant Gaunt," he said, "you are too much

in the company of my daughter. I cannot permit your name and hers to be linked in the gossip of the countryside. Are you likely to join your ship soon?"

This blast of heavy guns caught Gaunt unprepared. His cheek flushed. Then he looked at Sir John with eyes as direct as his own, and frankness as absolute.

"Yes," he said; "but, Sir John—it may seem audacious on my part—a happiness I don't deserve—but I hope to win Miss Litton as my wife."

Sir John went purple with astonishment and anger.

"That is not to be thought of, sir. I have quite other plans for Miss Litton."

"But——"

"There is no 'but' in the case. My wishes in the matter are final."

"I cannot accept them as final for me," said Gaunt coolly.

"You can't accept them as final?" inquired Sir John, in rising tones.

"No; I love Miss Litton; and, God helping me, I'll win her—or I'll try to win her—for my wife."

Sir John was about to observe that "God" did not come into the matter at all, when the look in Gaunt's eyes checked the words, in spite of himself.

"Will you not give me a chance," Gaunt went on steadily, "of proving myself fit for such a happiness?"

"No, sir, the matter must end at once. It ought never to have begun. You have abused my hospitality."

“That’s not quite fair, Sir John; I have spoken no word to Miss Litton that you might not have heard.”

“You will regard all intercourse betwixt yourself and the members of my family forbidden, Lieutenant Gaunt,” said Sir John relentlessly.

“No,” replied Gaunt; “I owe you all respect, but you have no right to command me. I’ll accept Miss Litton’s decision, if she decides against me; but I owe it to myself to at least speak to her.”

Sir John looked at him. “I’ll take care, young man,” he said grimly, “that you haven’t the chance.”

“Then, sir, I’ll try and make it,” and Gaunt looked at Sir John as he might have looked at a French privateer trying to get the weather gauge of him. That worthy merchant, indeed, had never yet met a glance so keen and masterful. They are not to be found on the Exchange! Here was a suitor of warlike temper, and Sir John walked away with an angry sense of defeat, but more than ever bent on getting quit of a lover so alarming.

To proclaim open war with the father was hardly the way to win the daughter, as Gaunt presently reflected. “But, hang it!” he said to himself, “am I to strike my flag without firing a shot?” and he proceeded to watch the Hall as though it were a French port, off which he was cruising. And Fate was once more strangely kind to him. Two days after, while wandering in a leafy lane, he caught a glimpse of Miss Litton. She was walking, with head bent pensively, and thoughts in dreamland.

Now Gaunt was not only a lover; he was a sailor,

with a sailor's frankness and ardour. Sir John, moreover, had proclaimed open war, and Gaunt had no scruples about "weathering" on an enemy. He was prepared, in the campaign he had in hand, to use all the devices of war against Sir John, and he was determined not to let the present opportunity slip.

He waited till she came near. "Miss Litton," he said quietly. She looked up quickly, and the colour ran from brow to chin; and in that sudden flush, Gaunt's keen eye saw burning, for him, a signal of hope. Why did the sound of his voice paint the cheek of the girl he loved with that exquisite carmine?

But woman, at best, is a paradox, or even a bundle of paradoxes. Irene proved to be in a very unmelting and contradictory mood. A mutinous look awoke in her eyes, an ominous curve shaped itself on her dainty lips. Gaunt, however, was not the lover to throw away his chance.

"Miss Litton," he said presently, "it is idle to describe all you are to me." Then he blundered on, with rough frankness, to his point. "I love you with all the affection man ever gave to a woman. To win you I would give my life. I think," he said, dropping his voice, "God surely made us for each other."

There was depth in Gaunt's tones, fire and passion in his looks; but if Irene felt any answering thrill of tender emotion, she hid it with entire success. She looked at Gaunt with cool, proud, questioning eyes, hardly softened—almost, indeed, made more cruel—by the humour in her lips.

"Your father," Gaunt went on, "forbids me to speak to you; but how can I do anything else than speak? You can dismiss me, if you will, but I will take dismissal from no other lips than your own."

"But why can you not accept my father's judgment? He is a man of affairs, and much wiser than I."

Gaunt looked keenly at her.

"If you tell me your heart reflects his judgment I will be silent. Does it?" he asked.

Irene evaded a question she found inconvenient, and which she could hardly have answered, even to herself; and Gaunt—when was an ardent lover a good diplomatist?—did not press his inquiry.

"I don't ask you to give me a pledge"—here Irene's exquisite eyebrows went up with an air of dignified astonishment. "No; but I put my hopes in your keeping. I *will* win you! I believe I can; and win you, too, with your father's consent. But give me a chance," he pleaded.

"Win me," said Irene. "Am I a prize in a game of cards?" and her eyes gleamed with half-cruel humour.

"Give me time, and a chance of showing myself worthy of you," Gaunt urged.

"What argument will prove that? 'Worthy of me!' If Geoff is to be believed, no living woman is worthy of Lieutenant Gaunt." Her eyes seemed to deride him, and with a touch of something like honest anger Gaunt looked at her.

"You are doing neither yourself nor me justice, Irene," he cried. "Be honest with me."

The passion—not to say the sternness—in his voice and eyes shook the girl in spite of herself. Here, she felt, with a sudden rush of feeling, half-angry, half-tender, was her master. But as she stood with down-dropped eyes and silent lips there was a sound of hasty feet along the path, young Litton came round the curve, and, following him, Sir John.

"Mr. Gaunt," he broke out furiously, "this is an impertinence!"

Gaunt had no time to reply. Some new feeling seemed to suddenly awaken in Irene.

"No, father," she said; and there was something in the level tones of her voice, something in the proud set of her head and the courage of her eyes, that hushed Sir John—"Lieutenant Gaunt has only said what any girl in the world might be proud to hear."

Then she turned round to Gaunt, and put out her slender hand.

"Good-bye, Lieutenant Gaunt. I am a daughter, and shall obey my father; but I shall not forget," and she walked quickly away.

Gaunt hesitated for a moment; then, lifting his hat to Sir John, he passed on.

"I'll get that fellow sent about his business," said Sir John, with an oath.

He had influence at the Admiralty; and a fortnight afterwards Gaunt was ordered to join his ship, while young Litton was transferred to the *Victory*.

When they met again, Gaunt was under the cloud of failure; and Litton, influenced both by his father's quarrel and by his new surroundings, was a changed lad. Gaunt found himself temporarily deposed from his office of hero! Brother and sister alike seemed to have passed to new orbits beyond his reach.

CHAPTER VI

THE SCHOONER AT WORK

“ Her hearth is wide to every wind
That makes the white ash spin ;
And tide, and tide, and 'tween the tides
Her sons go out and in.”

—KIPLING.

WHEN Gaunt came on deck the next morning he had left his dreams and his sorrows, as a lover, behind him, in the kingdom of sleep: he was nothing but the keen and eager seaman, with every faculty bent on the task in hand.

“Litton,” he said, “the *Romulus* is off, and the *Hirondelle* will certainly make her dash within the next few hours; perhaps with the first flaw of wind from the east. The moon suits her, and Captain Giron will be eager to be off. I will run in to-night, and put you ashore, as we arranged, at the foot of the cliff. You must dress like a French fisher-boy; I picked up the necessary duds in the forecastle of *L'Aurore*, the prison-ship of the fleet. There is a tumble of fallen rocks all along the foot of the cliffs, and you can lie safely hidden somewhere in it during the day. At night you must creep up to the edge of the cliff which looks down upon the harbour.

The *Hirondelle* will lie directly under you. If they are preparing to move, you will hear the men in the rigging, the flap of the topsail, or the creak of the cable as they weigh. Then run to the seaward edge of the cliff and flash the arranged signal. Johnson will be lying off in the cutter; he will send it on to the schooner, and the boats will put off at once. We've talked it all over before, and you understand every detail.

"It is risky, my lad," he added, with a drop in his voice.

"Hang the risk," said Litton, though he felt that his heart was beating a little faster at the moment. "I'll lie close all day, and keep watch on the *Hirondelle* at night, sir, safely enough."

Gaunt hesitated, even at this last moment, and looked at the gallant lad with a certain pang of apprehension. Was it right to send him on so perilous an errand? But Litton had eagerly accepted the task; he was better fitted by quickness of wit and nimbleness of foot, as well as by his knowledge of French, than any one else in the schooner, save Gaunt himself, for the adventure. And Gaunt judged the lad by himself. It would break his heart to be passed over.

Then, too, another unspoken reason weighed with Gaunt. He was giving a chance of distinction to the lad; and behind the lad Gaunt saw the face of the girl he loved. He had, moreover, the sailor's buoyant confidence, the somewhat reckless certainty that everything would turn out well.

That night the schooner lay-to a couple of miles off the coast, and Gaunt and Litton, in a dinghy, with two seamen, pulled silently shoreward. The oars were muffled, the boat had been painted grey, and moved as viewlessly as a shadow, and almost as silently, over the sea. When near the shore the men lay on their oars, and Gaunt let the boat drift in till it touched the sandy beach. Litton silently stepped ashore, and Gaunt, with a brief whispered farewell, and an energetic grasp of the lad's hand, pulled seaward.

Litton, gallant youth though he was, felt his heart sink as the grey patch which represented the boat melted into the dusk of the night. He stood alone on the French coast. If captured, he might be treated as a spy. The great cliff flung its shadow, in the dim moonlight, on him, and a chill seemed to creep through its blackness into his very blood. He could almost imagine that the sea at his feet was whispering a lament! For a moment the boy wished himself back on the schooner.

Then he braced himself up as he thought what a tale this would be to tell in the gunroom of the *Victory*! What would not the other middies—even that beast Marston, the bully of the middies' berth—give to be here! Pride in his task awoke. Gaunt and everybody on the schooner would all night long be watching for the flash of his lantern. His boy's senses were to detect the first sign of movement in the French brig. He was to give the signal that would send the boats of the schooner pulling hard for the

gap in the reef. Here was an adventure, indeed; and he was playing a big part in it! What would Irene think of him—the sister whose shining and steadfast eyes were a sort of moral code for that gay young imp, her middy brother?

The lad crept into a patch of dry sand beneath the rocks, turned his bag of supplies into a pillow, and lay down for a snooze. He would choose some safer place of concealment when the day broke.

Events fell out exactly as Gaunt's shrewd and forecasting brain had guessed. The *Romulus* had vanished. All day the horizon was empty; for the sea in those days of long blockades and all-including war was almost deserted. Once or twice a passing topsail, like a drifting and tiny point of silver, showed above the skyline, and vanished. A grey shadowy patch, a faint speck on the south-west horizon, Litton guessed to be the schooner.

At night the middy scrambled up the cliff, helped by the bushes which grew on its face, and stole furtively across the mile of stubbly heath to the edge of the little harbour. A few fishing boats lay on the sand; half-a-dozen cutters were moored near the shore. The lights and voices of the hamlet died; and there, silent under the very shadow of the cliff, lay the *Hirondelle*! Even in the uncertain moonlight Litton could admire the beautiful model that floated like a bird on the water; her tall and naked masts foreshortened by the height from which Litton looked down upon them. Once, as he crouched in the tussocks of long grass, a couple of revenue officers

passed by; and once a lover and his lass, with arms affectionately interlinked, sauntered and lingered near him. Twice, as he lay in the tangle of broken rocks, during the day, he heard the chatter of fishermen's voices as they passed. But the coast was lonely, and he had no more exciting experiences than these. The adventure was proving unexpectedly dull!

On the second night, however, the *Hirondelle* showed signs of life. Boat after boat put off from the shore, bringing her crew on board. There was a sound of loud talking on the deck, the harsh cheep of blocks on the masts. Presently, as Litton listened keenly, he heard the voices of men in the rigging, the flap of canvas, the clink of a windlass. The anchor was being shortened; the moment had come!

Litton ran like a hare through the long grass till he reached the seaward face of the cliff. His lantern was already lit; he stooped over it, flinging his jacket over his head so as to screen the light, and drew back the slide. The tiny point of keen flame shot out through the darkness seaward. Thrice he drew the slide, then waited while he counted a hundred, and repeated the signal; yet again he drew the slide.

That triple pulse of light was the signal which would set the boats and the schooner moving. Was it seen and understood? Litton fancied he caught a faint spark in the offing, and persuaded himself it was the cutter repeating the signal to the schooner.

But it died away, and was not repeated. All he could now do was to wait, though while he waited a fever of impatience burned in his blood.

Presently Litton saw a point of light far out at sea ; it ran into a line of lights, such as might have shone from some tall frigate in the offing. But he knew it was only the little and lubberly *Actif*, clothing itself in threatening points of flame to bluff the Frenchman ! That fainter single light to the west must be the cutter ; another flare eastward was, no doubt, the floating light.

Litton chuckled with pure delight at that menacing cluster of lights, so perfect was the trick. And it was the moving slide of his tiny lantern which had set them all aflame !

An hour later he caught the faint flap of a sail from the mouth of the inlet, and this was followed by the ghostly image of the *Hirondelle* creeping out to sea. She moved like some dark shadow on the water, with all her lights shrouded ; but Litton could hear, every now and again, the call of a voice ; and once a high, thin, high-pitched "*N'importe*" reached him. Silence is not a French virtue, nor an element in French sea-discipline.

Presently the look-out on the French brig caught sight of the line of sprinkled and threatening lights in the offing, and Litton noted with a chuckle how the clamour of voices on the Frenchman's deck grew shriller at that sight. An energetic "*Sacre!*" detached itself from the clamour, and floated up to the boyish listener on the cliff, whereupon Litton chuckled anew, and with fresh joy.

Still the *Hirondelle* ran on steadily. Was she going to bear out to sea in scorn of peril, trusting

to the darkness and to her own heels for escape? On that doubt hung the whole adventure; and as the minutes crept past with no sign of change in the brig's course, Litton grew almost frantic with anxiety. Steadily the Frenchman kept her course. She was now almost invisible, a shadow dissolving into the shadowy night. But—yes!—she had swung round! She was running parallel with the coast; she was taking the channel. The Frenchman was in the trap!

Litton rolled on the rough grass with boyish delight when this was beyond doubt. He had played his part successfully. He knew the schooner's boats were already far on their way to the gap in the reef. Then he pictured the *Hirondelle* coming up in the gloom; the silent dash of the boats—grey shadows in the grey moonlight; the fling of the grapnels, the leap of the sailors, clad in white like ghosts. That such a business should be so near, and he not in it! And yet, he repeated to himself, the signal of his boy's hand had set the whole fierce drama in motion. Here was a stirring and exultant memory sufficient to last for a lifetime.

As Litton had guessed, that triple pencil of light flashed from his lantern on the cliff to the cutter had been shot in turn to the schooner. Gaunt himself, watching from the topsail yard of the *Actif*, had caught it first.

"That's the signal," he said quietly to the master's mate beside him. "The *Hirondelle* is coming out. Let the schooner pay off and run down to the

cutter. Up with the lanterns. Call away the boats' crews."

Everything was ready to the minutest detail, for Gaunt took no needless risks. The men were told off to the boats. Gaunt himself led in the cutter; Johnson commanded one boat, and the master's mate another—the three boats carrying a force of sixty-five men. The oars were muffled; the men were in white duck; the boats were painted grey. Every art was used to trick the senses of the Frenchmen. In five minutes from Litton's signal reaching the schooner, the boats were stretching, silent and ghostlike, towards the reef; while the *Actif* herself, with less than a dozen men left on board, was running off to drop the floating light in position.

Gaunt, when the boats were fairly under way, looked back from the stern-sheets of the cutter. The lights of the schooner were gleaming in warlike and menacing fashion. He knew, however, that he was taking a great risk. If the *Hirondelle* ran boldly out to sea the schooner was helpless to stop her; if Captain Giron, indeed, detected the trick of the lights the *Actif* herself would probably be captured, and Gaunt would be left with his boats to pull back, outwitted and disgraced, to the flagship. But he had put his imagination, so to speak, inside the Frenchman's brain, and he guessed with an almost entertaining sense of absolute certainty how Captain Giron would act. And it was a proof of Gaunt's faculty for leadership that, having settled

every detail of his plans, he allowed no nerve-relaxing doubts to make the execution of them hesitating.

His men, on their part, had no doubts whatever. The wind blew sharply from the south-east; the flying clouds gave the sky a wild look; as the boats cut through the rising sea the spray broke over them. They were moving through darkness and uncertainty to the bloody perils of a desperate struggle. Yet the seamen in the boats chuckled with contented anticipation as they bent to their oars. The trick of the lights delighted them. They were outwitting the Frenchman, a process almost more enjoyable than even that of thrashing him! All the details of the adventure—the grey-painted schooner and boats, the muffled oars, the white duck suits they wore, the gleam of the midgy's lantern, telling that the Frenchman was out—all this tickled the imagination of the seamen.

It was a pull of at least five miles to the point in the reef broken by the passage through which the *Hirondelle* must come; but the seamen lifted their boats with each pull of their oars, till the hiss of the rushing stems rose sharply on the still night air.

"Steady, men!" said Gaunt. "Keep your breath! You will need it all, and we have plenty of time."

Gaunt had calculated the boats would make the inlet within an hour. Litton's signal reached the schooner nearly an hour before the *Hirondelle* was clear of the harbour, and Captain Giron would certainly run down the channel, lit by no friendly

lights, under easy sail, and with great caution. The brig could hardly swing into the passage in less than two hours, and the boats would reach that point more than an hour earlier.

Gaunt had set the rocks by a star, so that there was no need to risk discovery by a gleam of light when consulting the compass. And so accurately had he timed and led the boats, that, just as the hour ended, the splintered rocks were visible, showing black against the night sky. A murmur of satisfaction ran through the boats as the men lay on their oars, and they found they had struck so accurately the entrance to the passage.

“Well done, the captain!” said Johnson to his boat’s crew. “We’ve stopped the hole right enough. Now we’ve got to catch the rat.”

CHAPTER VII

THE DASH AT THE BRIG

“And in the waiting silences the rudder whined beneath,
And each man drew his watchful breath, slow-taken ’tween the
teeth—

Trigger and ear and eye acock, knit brow and hard-drawn lips—
Bracing his feet by chock and cleat for the rolling of the ships.”

—KIPLING.

GAUNT knew the passage well—he had lurked in it two days when making his escape from Toulon—and was able at once to choose the place of concealment for each boat. Close to the entrance from the channel a deep recess in the rocks furnished a hiding-place for one boat; a little further up a similar gap offered concealment for the second boat. The moon would throw them into the shadow; and, as the channel was deepest on that side of the passage, it was certain the *Hirondelle* would hug the rocks, and so pass within easy springing distance of the boats. The place for the other boat was further up the passage, and she must lie in the open moon-light. But in the uncertain light, and as the men were enjoined to lie down, the boat would probably escape notice, or be taken for a rock.

Gaunt chose the position near the entrance of

the narrow passage for his own boat. He meant to board the brig aft, and carry her quarterdeck with a rush. The French crew, thus robbed at a stroke of their officers, would be leaderless, and well-nigh helpless. Gaunt knew, too, Captain Giron's daring and resource; it was highly desirable that he should be out of the fight almost before it began. The onfall was to be in perfect silence. No shot or shout was to give the signal. The other boats were to watch for the dash of Gaunt's cutter, and follow instantly.

Gaunt saw each boat in its appointed place as he came up the passage and gave them his last orders. Then he backed his own boat into the position he had chosen; and nothing remained but to wait for the approaching brig.

The wind scuffled overhead; the shadows of the flying clouds flitted across the narrow ribbon of twisted water which formed the passage. The men in the boats sat in grimmest silence. Now and again a restless sailor shifted uneasily, and his cutlass clashed softly—bringing a low and stern rebuke from the officer in the stern-sheets. So the minutes crept past slowly. Was the *Hirondelle* indeed coming up the channel?

Rather to keep his men steady than for his own satisfaction, Gaunt, with a light-footed topman at his side, climbed the face of the rock and peered up the channel. The moon was nearly at the full: the sea lay white beneath its light, but flecked with drifting shadows cast by the hurrying masses of

clouds. The grey sea seemed empty; against the dim coast there was no gleam of white sail. The sighing wind, the fretting waves, created a vague sense of melancholy, if not of menace. But Gaunt, an alert and practical seaman, was too intent on the business in hand to be affected by tint of sea or sky, or lament of breaking waves. He looked long and keenly to windward.

"Look, Tom," he said to the quick-eyed sailor beside him. "Don't you catch a moving point just underneath that bright star?"

The seaman strained his eyes; but sky and sea-line were blended in one vague gloom.

"Yes, sir," he said presently; "there is something. It's the head of a topsail. It's the brig!"

Gaunt watched for a few minutes. Yes! Like some dark and hooded ghost through the dim night the French brig was coming!

Gaunt scrambled down the rocks, and sent a low whistle up the passage as a signal to the other boats that the enemy was near. The men crouched low in their boats, each sailor with his cutlass beside him. One man in the bow of each boat had beside him a grapnel ready for the cast. The oars were swung fore and aft, so as to escape notice while the brig glided past.

The men listened with straining ears. But nothing could as yet be heard save the fret of the waves on the rocks, the sigh of the wind. Presently came another sound; it was the flap of canvas, clear and distinct. Every sailor knew that sound, and read

its meaning! Next was heard a nasal, carrying, high-pitched voice giving some order in French. Then a jib was dimly visible coming round the edge of rock; a bowsprit, a bellying topsail followed. By this time a shrill chatter of voices could be heard, for there is no silence on a French deck. Then the *Hirondelle* came slowly and gracefully round, until her head looked up the passage, and her sails were flapping.

Captain Giron was a skilful seaman, and the brig was conned into the passage with the nicest judgment. The moonlight ran across her deck as she glided past; it glittered from the muzzles of her guns, which, as it happened, were long brass 12-pounders; a gleam of it sparkled from the handle of a cutlass at the side of a figure on the brig's low poop. The French look-outs were searching the channel ahead; none saw the boat, with its crouching figures, under the shadow of the rocks, as the graceful hull of the brig slid past.

Gaunt waited with cool and measured patience till the whole length of the brig was in the passage.

"Now, men; silently!" he whispered.

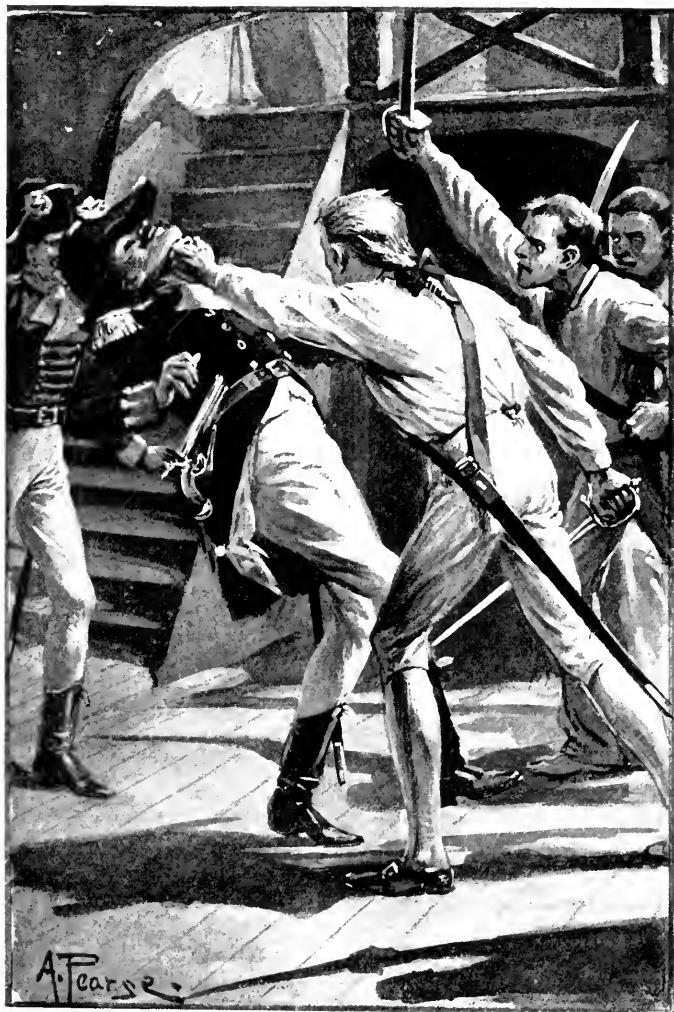
Ten oars, all double-banked, were dropped noiselessly into the water, and the boat shot out with arrowy swiftness, like a darted spear—or like the thrust of a boarding-pike—at the brig's quarter. Gaunt glanced at that moment up the channel; the bow of the second boat was just clear of the rocks. It, too, was making its rush.

Still there came no cry from the Frenchman's

deck. Gaunt steered his own boat with exquisite steadiness and skill, so that it swung round, almost grazing the brig's quarter. With a fierce gesture he signalled to the sailor with the grapnel to fling. The silent order was instantly obeyed; the grapnel rose in the uncertain light, and fell with a clash on the Frenchman's bulwarks.

Just then there came an alarmed shout from the look-out in the head of the brig, and the officer at the break of the poop leaned eagerly forward to catch the sound and read its meaning. Gaunt, at that instant, leaped into the main chains of the Frenchman, caught at the edge of the bulwark, and swung himself over; his men, many of them cutlass in teeth, were eagerly following him.

The French officer turned at the sound of Gaunt's leap and the clash of the grapnel, and saw a swarm of white-clad figures, without sound of voice or flash of pistol, come tumbling over the brig's quarter. They seemed to leap out of the sea! With a half-uttered shout the Frenchman snatched at a pistol in his belt; but Gaunt was upon him. The French officer had flung his face backward, and the moonlight shone on the broad, grim features, contorted into lines of astonishment. Gaunt could see the retracted lips, the startled eyes. His weapon was lifted high, but he hesitated to strike with the cutlass-edge; instead, he smote fiercely with his left hand under the uplifted chin of his antagonist, and the Frenchman went down as if struck by a thunderbolt. Captain Giron was out of the fight!



"HE SMOTE FIERCELY WITH HIS LEFT HAND"

Forward on either bow of the *Hirondelle* the other boats had boarded. To the astonished Frenchmen, these white-clad, soundless, charging figures, that came with such silent fierceness, might have fallen out of space, or leaped out of the sea, they appeared so suddenly. In a moment the Frenchman's deck was a tumult of yells, a mad pandemonium of whirling, smiting figures. Gaunt had detailed a man to stand by the wheel of the brig, so that she might not go on the rocks; he himself, when the poop had been cleared by the first rush of his party, directed the eddying fight coolly from the poop's break.

The advantage was all with the British. The surprise was perfect. They caught the French half armed. Gaunt's strategy of clearing the poop left the Frenchmen without leadership; and, forward, the companion-way to the forecabin had been seized and closed, and every Frenchman below was a prisoner. For the first few fierce minutes the cutlasses were busy; then, feeling the fight won, the British sailors knocked their remaining foes down, with half-contemptuous good nature, with their fists. Gaunt was still standing at the edge of the poop, when one of the petty officers, a red gash on his brown forehead, came running aft to say that the brig was theirs.

"Clear the cabin," said Gaunt, "and hold it!" and half-a-dozen seamen ran down the companion steps into the cabin, and drove out some of the French officers and sailors who had taken refuge there. Johnson, meanwhile, had opened the companion-way leading to the forecabin.

"Up, you lubbers," he was shouting to the French sailors who had been caught below at the moment of attack, and some thirty bewildered Frenchmen obeyed the summons, and came on deck, to find they were prisoners, and the brig had changed masters.

By this time the *Hirondelle* was clear of the passage, and was leaning over to the breeze, while she rose and fell to the heavier sea. The bodies of the slain were being laid side by side; the wounded were roughly attended to. Amongst these was Captain Giron. He was still dazed with the effects of Gaunt's blow, and sat with his back against the lee bulwark, gazing with bewildered eyes on the scene before him. The French captain now staggered to his feet and looked about him with a sort of furious amazement.

Captain Giron's broad, olive-brown face was set on massive shoulders; the bold eyes looked out from beneath the upward slanting eyebrows with an air of command, through which ran a gleam of ferocity. His hair was almost blue-black, and of an extraordinary thickness, coming to a sort of peak on the forehead between the tilted eyebrows. By a freak it was cut very close, and so resembled a black, close-fitting cap, peaked in the centre, and thrust down to the base of the ears. That the French captain was a dangerous man was written in every curve and line of his great face. The fierceness of a wolf was stamped on it, with much of a wolf's cunning.

Captain Giron looked round the deck, and his quick eye read the character of his captors.

"Ah! cursed English!" he said in French.

"No use in cursing us, Captain Giron," Gaunt replied in the same language; "this is only sea law. You captured me, and I return the compliment."

Captain Giron peered forward; in the uncertain light he had not yet recognised Gaunt. Just then a seaman uncovered the binnacle light, and it shone on Gaunt's features. Captain Giron involuntarily uttered an oath, deep and fierce and foul. Gaunt laughed cheerfully.

"You took the *Hirondelle* from under my feet, and I have taken it, in turn, from under yours. We've caught the smartest French seaman and the fastest French boat afloat; and caught them both napping."

The Frenchman stood, an image of inarticulate wrath; his hands and his features working, his eyes flitting to and fro, like those of a wild beast. Language for the moment failed him. Gaunt felt ashamed of his boast.

"It's the fortune of war," he said; "and you are too good a seaman not to take disaster bravely. And," he added, with a touch of sternness in his voice, "you will be treated better than you treated my brave fellows whom you caught by a disgraceful trick."

Captain Giron, with a desperate effort, pulled himself together.

"The brig is yours, monsieur. I am hurt. I will go to my cabin," and he stepped towards the companion ladder.

"No!" said Gaunt coolly, "not yet, Captain Giron.

Your hurt shall be attended to; but you must stay on deck for the present."

The Frenchman swore softly to himself, with fresh energy. Gaunt's words had defeated some hidden purpose he had formed.

By this time the French crew had been disarmed, and were sitting in a melancholy cluster on the lee side of the deck, with a score of British sailors on guard; the French captain, with the only officer unhurt, were watched by a petty officer. But another task remained. Litton was to be picked up, and Gaunt felt that to be almost as important as the capture of the *Hirondelle* herself.

The wind was steady and favourable. Every Frenchman was sent below; the brig rounded, ran back through the passage into the channel, and, with every light covered, retraced its course to the harbour-mouth. Gaunt was confident that if the *Hirondelle* was seen from the battery it would be assumed she had given up the attempt to run out to sea, and was returning to the harbour.

Directly the brig was clear of the reef, and opposite the cliffs at the harbour entrance, she was thrown into the wind, and the dinghy was lowered and rowed quickly and silently to the shore. Litton was sure to be on the watch; and, as a matter of fact, the moment the stem of the boat touched the sand the midgy sprang up from behind a rock, and leaped on board. Without a word being spoken, the boat pushed off. Litton would have poured out a torrent of eager questions, but Gaunt hushed him

with a gesture. Speech was perilous at that moment! The sound of an English voice, if recognised, would bring the red flash of the guns from the cliffs.

When the boat was a safe distance from the shore, however, Gaunt broke into generous praise.

"Well done! Litton, you were too smart for the Frenchmen; and your signal came through all right. We owe the brig to you, lad!"

Gaunt's words brought a choking sensation into the lad's throat. Before he could trust himself to speak they had reached the brig, and when they stepped on to her deck a low eager cheer broke from the crew.

"Silence! men," said Gaunt sharply; "do you want to bring the fire of the battery on us? Put her about," he said briefly to the master's mate in charge.

Litton found that his exploit had brought him fame. He had to tell his story a dozen times over, and for the whole of the next day, in whatever direction he looked, he met some sailor's face, with an admiring grin upon it, turned towards him. Then he began to realise that fame had some exasperating penalties.

Almost as pleasant as Gaunt's frank, if curt, praise, was the look of half-grim, half-humorous approval on Johnson's hard features when Litton stopped for a moment's chat with him, under the break of the fore-castle, the next morning.

"We've got the Frenchman," said Litton exultantly.

"Aye," said the long seaman, "and it's a good bit

of work; and Lieutenant Gaunt knows too much for Johnny Crapaud. But," he went on, "yours was the pluckiest bit in the whole business. When it's a matter of cutting out a privateer, or tumbling over the bulwarks of a French frigate, why, we're in a crowd, and every Jack hustles on the next fellow. But to land yonder," with a jerk of his thumb towards the French coast, "all alone, and in the dark, and hang on all day, that needs something better than 'cutting-out' courage," and Johnson's long, lean, weather-bronzed face broke into an iron smile as he looked up and down Litton's boyish figure. "No fear of the navy, sir, while the middies' berth produces such stuff." Then Johnson stopped, embarrassed. He found himself, to his own wonder, paying a compliment.

The dawn was breaking as the prize backed her topsails alongside the *Actif*, and a small tempest of disgusted "sacres" went up from the lee bulwarks of the brig as the Frenchmen grouped there saw the stumpy, unwarlike-looking schooner whose boats had captured the famous *Hirondelle*. Captain Giron's face was scribbled over with characters of wrath. It was not merely that he had been captured; he was disgraced, and—that worst disaster of all to a Frenchman—turned into a mere jest!

Gaunt sent some of his prisoners on board the schooner, the two vessels bore up for the blockading fleet, and Gaunt set about examining his prize. He knew her already, very well, and recalled still how, at his first sight of her, he had admired the graceful,

wicked-looking privateer, floating like a sea-bird, with her raking masts and huge spread of sail. He remembered, too, how, later, the memory of the brig had become a sting and a humiliation to him. But Gaunt was now able to study the *Hirondelle* once more with the eye of a captor, and with an imagination purged of all shame. He had served in the West Indies, and in those warm seas, the hunting-ground of swift privateers, he had seen many a fine model; but never, he vowed, one to equal the French brig!

She was of a great beam, though shallow draught; her lines were fine to daintiness. The set of her cutwater, the flow of her bow-lines, the daring height and rake of her masts, the vast stretch of her canvas, all told of speed. But though shallow in hull she had, what was an unusual feature in the ships of that day, a very deep and sharp keel—an anticipation on a small scale of the wedge-like keel of a racing-yacht of to-day—making her weatherly, and “stiff” under canvas. Her deck was flush save for a low poop, giving her a great stretch of floor. But it was the exquisite harmony of all her proportions which gave the brig, in spite of her tonnage, an aspect of lightness and grace, the look of a sea-bird, with newly folded wings, alighting on a wave. She was formidably armed, with six brass 12-pounders in each broadside, and a long 18-pounder on a movable table forward. No brig under the British flag, indeed, could compare with her in weight of fire. Her crew consisted of ninety men, of whom nearly one-third

had been killed or wounded in the short, fierce rush of the British boarders.

Gaunt next explored the once familiar cabin. It was low, but wide and well lit. Captain Giron's cabin opened off it. A comfortable bunk filled one side; a few pictures of a very licentious sort adorned the walls; a cutlass hung by its hilt from a brass nail; a pair of handsome pistols rested in a leathern holder at the head of the bunk. Beneath the port-hole was a desk, and beside it a massive cabinet, with its drawers locked. Here, if anywhere, he might expect to find the much-wanted despatches.

Gaunt went back to the deck, and crossed to where Captain Giron sat moodily, with folded arms.

"Captain Giron," he said, "I must have your keys."

"I thought messieurs the English did not pick the pockets of their prisoners!"

"I don't propose to pick your pockets, Captain Giron——"

"To pick the locks of my cabinet," broke in the Frenchman fiercely, "what is that?"

"I must be satisfied," Gaunt went on steadily, "that cabinet contains no public documents of value, and if I don't open it with your keys, I shall unlock it with the carpenter's chisel."

The Frenchman hesitated for a moment, his dark face flushed still more blackly with anger; and then, with an effort, and making a virtue of necessity, he pulled out his keys. Gaunt examined drawer after

drawer in the cabinet. There was gold, a great bundle of assignats, a list of the crew, the ship's log, a record of the last voyage, &c. At last he came across a thick packet, splashed with huge seals, bearing the stamp of the French Foreign Office, with the single word "Despatches" upon it, and some characters in cipher. This was plainly the prize for which Sir John Jervis was eager.

By this time the day was clear, and the *Hiron-delle*, though under reefed topsails, was leaving the plodding *Actif* behind her. Gaunt was eager to rejoin the fleet; he shook out his reefs, the *Hiron-delle* shot ahead, and three hours later hove-to under the lee of the *Victory*.

The tall bulwarks of the flagship were lined with curious and weatherbeaten faces as the French brig rounded to. Some knowledge of the business in hand had leaked out, and it was clear that this rakish and formidable-looking craft was the result of the adventure on which the schooner had been despatched. The criticism on the French brig, offered by the experts on the *Victory's* forecastle who stared at her, might well have filled its designer—if he had heard them—with pride.

"That's a flyer, Jack," said one hairy salt, leaning on the cathead of the *Victory*. "Look at her counter! And what a spread of canvas! Wouldn't she creep to windward of us?"

"Yes," responded his mate, who was contemplating the brig with the eye of a connoisseur, "chasing her would be like chasing a ghost."

"Think of her," growled another sea-veteran, "creeping up on the quarter of a West Indiaman."

"Johnny Crapaud knows how to build a ship, and we know how to take 'em and sail 'em," was the summing-up of the salt on the cathead, as he complacently turned his quid in his cheek.

CHAPTER VIII

A GREAT CAPTAIN'S CARES

“ . . . dark days still bring to light
Man's prudence and man's fiery might.”

—ARNOLD.

THE admiral, to Gaunt's disappointment, could not be seen when he went on board the *Victory*, and he was directed to send in at once any documents he had found in his prize, and to report himself later in the afternoon. Gaunt spent some busy hours in getting his wounded attended to, and sending Captain Giron and the French crew to *L'Aurore*, the prison-ship of the fleet. At eight bells he was waiting a summons to the admiral's cabin.

Jervis sat in his chair, his head sunk between his shoulders, a darker look of care than usual on his gloomy features. He looked at Gaunt with hard, questioning, half-melancholy, yet half-humorous gaze.

“ Well, Gaunt,” he said, “ you caught the Frenchman. That tub of a schooner, after all, proved too much for what the French think the smartest brig afloat,” and Jervis laughed with a sort of harsh glee-fulness. “ How was it done ? ”

Gaunt told his story with sailor-like directness and brevity.

"But you ran a great risk with young Litton," said the admiral, with a look of angry rebuke. "What would Sir John have said if his boy had been caught and shot as a spy?"

"I couldn't do that part of the business myself, sir; but I was sure the risk was not great. I know the ground, and I know young Litton, too. He talks French like a Paris gamin, and he has wit and coolness enough for a dozen men. Besides, it was giving a brave lad a chance."

"Ah, yes; the monkey has impudence enough for the whole gunroom," answered Jervis; "and now he will be a hero," he grumbled. "I must write to his father and tell him the tale. You young fellows," Jervis went on, "have the best of it: all the fun, most of the fighting, and none of the worry, or the heavy burden of responsibility."

Some half-bitter note in Jervis' voice made Gaunt look at him more keenly. The admiral seemed to him to have grown older, almost in a day. His grim face was more deeply lined, his head sank lower betwixt his shoulders; the skin under his tired eyes formed little pendent bags. The gleam of humour—sometimes half-cruel, and sometimes half-melancholy—came more seldom to his eyes. He went on, as if unconscious of the young seaman's presence.

"Ay! the despatches are serious enough. We are to have Spain on our hands, as well as Holland. We may have to give up the Mediterranean; can we hold

even the narrow seas? Yes!"—with a deep breath which was almost a groan—"the sky is black!"

Then he looked up, and his eyes dwelt sharply on Gaunt's strong, clear face, with the light of alert intelligence shining in his eyes.

"You weren't meant to hear that, Gaunt."

"I know that, sir; but I can hold my tongue: or I can even forget what I have heard."

"Well," said Jervis—as if to talk was a relief, or as if willing to test the spirit of his fleet—"if we've the Spaniards on our hands, as well as the French and the Dutch—what then?"

"We'll hold our own, sir," replied Gaunt, with confidence. "The gunroom and the forecastle will smell fat prizes in the news. The Spaniards can build ships, but they can't sail them, or fight them. Every Jack forward will feel the doubloons rattling in his pockets as soon as he hears the tidings."

"Yes," said Jervis, with a faint smile on his dark features, "that's the forecastle view, I know. But what if we have to give up the Mediterranean? The Spanish admiral, Langara, with twenty ships of the line, is already in the straits, or through them; there are seven sail in Carthagenas; and if we are driven from Toulon, the twelve or fourteen line-of-battle ships lying there will be added to the combination. This will make a fleet of at least thirty-eight line-of-battle ships; and if they get through to Cadiz and then to Brest——" and the admiral's voice ceased; his chin fell on his breast.

Gaunt saw that Jervis was talking to himself. His

strong and gloomy intellect was forecasting an overwhelming combination, with possibilities beyond it from which even his iron courage shrank. And the old admiral read part, at least, of the future truly. Within three weeks from that talk in the cabin, the great fleet of Spain, with the contingent from Carthage added, cast anchor in the road at Toulon; making, with Brueys' ships there, the mightiest fleet that ever floated in its waters. And one black patch in that black sky even Jervis did not guess. He could not foresee Mann's amazing and ignoble defection, which robbed him of one-third of his force, and left him with fifteen ships in face of a combination of thirty-eight.

"What if we give up the Mediterranean?" he asked again.

"We'll hold the neck of the bottle—the straits," replied Gaunt, with spirit; "and Toulon can't join hands with either Cadiz or Brest while we do that."

Then with a faint flush in his cheek, and a moment's hesitation, he went on with a note of pride in his voice: "You have made this fleet, sir, the finest body of fighting ships on the sea. There's nothing afloat can match it. All the Spaniards and Frenchmen in the Mediterranean can't break out while we hold Gibraltar."

Jervis smiled and lifted his head; but the mood of confidence had passed. He changed the subject abruptly, and the altered tone of his voice made Gaunt instantly fall back to humbler ground. For a few minutes it had been an old British seaman

talking to a younger comrade: now it was the admiral speaking to a lieutenant.

“Gaunt,” he said, after a meditative pause, “you shall have command of the *Hirondelle*. I want a flyer for my despatches, and I think you are the man to make the brig fly. You shall have a smart junior and a couple of middies—you can keep young Litton, if you like. Arrange with Calder for your crew; he'll give you a couple of good master's mates, and reliable petty officers.”

With a few half-broken words of thanks, to which Jervis listened impatiently, Gaunt left the admiral's cabin. He was in a mood of elation. He had command of, perhaps, the fastest craft—and the most formidable for its size—under the British flag. He need not envy any man in the whole fleet.

And yet the curious and unexpected talk with the admiral—the strange gleam of confidence—sobered him. He had caught a glimpse of the great landscape of the war; of the perils which threatened England. A momentary partnership in the cares which press on the brain of a great captain had fallen on him. Nay, a great secret of policy was in his possession. To give up the Mediterranean! That might be inevitable; might even be near; but it must not be whispered! The young seaman felt—he hardly knew why—a new respect for his stern-faced admiral. There had come to him a sudden vision of the problems with which he had to wrestle.

Jervis' position, in fact, was, at that moment, in the highest degree anxious. He had succeeded

Hotham in the Mediterranean command—Hotham, the most ineffective and loitering of commanders; who at Hyères might have destroyed a French fleet, and didn't! Still the story was told in every gun-room and fore-castle of the fleet how his second in command energetically kicked his own cocked hat across the quarter-deck of his ship, before the eyes of the astonished crew, in default of being able to kick his admiral in person! For had not Hotham signalled to "Discontinue action," just when the British van was closing exultantly on the flying enemy's rear, and so robbed the fleet of victory?

But Hotham had been the cause of even worse disasters. England, in 1797, with France, Holland, and Spain arrayed in league against her, was to abandon the Mediterranean. Not a ship flying the British flag was left in its waters. It was an ignoble policy, and as disastrous as ignoble. For it left the Mediterranean a sealed chamber, in which, unsuspected and undisturbed, Napoleon forged the thunderbolt of the expedition to Egypt. But Hotham, in 1795, achieved a worse dishonour than even this. With a great fleet under his flag, and absolute command of the sea, he reduced the British power in the Mediterranean to a cipher. And he did this by his own mere inertness and sloth. He helplessly allowed French guns and war material to pass along the coast roads, and within the fire of his guns, unchecked. That made possible the successes of the Directory in Italy, in 1794-5, and Napoleon's great campaign in 1796.

Men are seldom weak in patches; and Hotham was as feeble in control over his own fleet as he was in action against the enemy. So he left to Jervis that worst of legacies—a fleet trembling on the verge of mutiny! Mutiny, however, was apt to fare ill under the grasp of Jervis' strong hand. His iron energy drew tight the bonds of discipline; a discipline that neither spared the weak nor feared the strong, and that left its stamp on the souls and bodies of the men on whom it lay. So in a few months the fleet in the Mediterranean, over which the flag of Jervis flew, became a fighting instrument of terrible efficiency.

But the French had overrun Italy; they had made an alliance with Spain; and on December 12, 1796—almost a year to a day from the moment he hoisted his flag—there came to Jervis the most bitter duty which could fall on a British admiral. He had to abandon the Mediterranean!

Gaunt found much to do before the *Hirondelle* was fit for service; for the British standard of sea-equipment was more practical and thorough than that of the French. Moreover, the brig was a more formidable craft than anything of a similar rating in the British Navy. Iron ballast was substituted for stone; a 32-pounder took the place of the 18-pounder gun amidships; the magazine was carefully examined and refilled; new sails took the place of old and patched canvas. A smart lieutenant named Fraser joined as second in command; Johnson had the rating of boatswain's mate; Peters that of gunner's

mate; Litton was transferred to the brig, with two other middies, to whom, on the strength of his recent experiences, that young gentleman extended a majestic patronage.

The men on the schooner formed the main body of the brig's crew, supplemented by drafts from the flagship. And when the *Hirondelle*, dipping its flag to the *Victory*, spread its white sails before a fresh south-west wind, and sailed for Gibraltar with despatches, no smarter craft, and no more contented crew, could have been found in the Mediterranean. Gaunt knew how to handle a craft of the brig's rig, and he quietly vowed that Jervis should have the best service ship or crew could render.

CHAPTER IX

THE MISSING ADMIRAL

“The wind blows fair, the vessel feels
The pressure of the rising breeze,
And, swiftest of a thousand keels,
She leaps to the careering seas.”

—WILLIS.

ONE of the earliest errands of the *Hirondelle*, as a despatch-boat, was of great urgency. When the Spanish fleet entered the Mediterranean, the British ships were scattered on patrol duty outside half-a-dozen ports, and were in danger of being destroyed in detail. Jervis found it necessary to concentrate quickly. Nelson, who, with a small squadron, was cruising off Genoa, was within easy call; but Mann, who, with seven ships, was keeping watch outside Carthage, ran the risk of being cut off. He had been warned early, however, and had joined the fleet off Toulon; but he, foolishly, brought up his ships short of provisions, and Jervis sent him back to Gibraltar for supplies, with orders to rejoin with the utmost despatch.

The days went by; the Spaniards and the French were concentrating, but there was no sign or word from Mann, and Jervis grew fretfully impatient.

With fifteen ships he might any morning find himself in the presence of twenty-six; and if the French ships in Toulon were added to the Spaniards, this would make a combined fleet of thirty-eight line-of-battle ships.

"Mann ought to be here," Jervis wrote, on October 10, "*if he does not deliberate too much.*"

Mann was physically as brave as any fore-castle Jack in the fleet; but whether he possessed the rarer courage required for a great decision was unknown. Jervis, the shrewdest of men, had guessed that flaw in Mann's temper, the fatal tendency to "deliberate too much." But great events were plainly at hand. Jervis had the gravest reasons for anxiety; and Gaunt was despatched under all sail in search of the much-deliberating Mann.

"The whole Spanish fleet, by this, is in the Mediterranean," said the admiral to Gaunt, when giving him his orders; "the divisions in Cadiz and Carthagea have been picked up, or will be, and it is most important that Admiral Mann joins me. Carry on with every inch of canvas. Go south of Minorca, if you like, to keep clear of the Spanish three-deckers. You may pick up the rear-admiral on that course; and if so, tell him to run through the Straits of Bonifaccio. But time is worth more than gold; so lose none. Keep your eyes open for the Spaniards, so as to give Mann the latest information of their whereabouts."

"Tell Mann," he said, rising from his chair with a gesture of anger—then he hesitated and paused.

He was plainly about to say something emphatic, but contented himself by adding—

“You will render a great service by bringing up Rear-Admiral Mann.”

Gaunt read his admiral's unspoken thought, and his quick brain grasped the whole situation. If, with one-third of his force missing, Jervis had to meet the whole Spanish force with the French ships from Toulon added, there might happen a great disaster to England.

“I may have to draw off from Toulon,” were the admiral's final words, “but I shall hang on at Corsica; and if Mann joins—*when* Mann joins,” he corrected himself—“I'll tackle both Spaniards and Frenchmen. But Admiral Mann must come up!”

The wind blew freshly from the south-east as the *Hirondelle* leaned to it, with every inch of canvas spread. It grew stronger still, every moment, while the brig ran on. Gaunt was a daring seaman, and the gallant little craft had never been so fiercely driven before. She lay down to the gale till the lee gunwale was under water and the rushing foam was half-way up the sloping deck. The keen winds sang in the ratlines; the stinging spray from the sharp cutwater drove incessantly along the whole deck. The masts bent like whipsticks.

“If the stays are not sound,” said Fraser to Gaunt, “and French ropes are not usually good, the masts will be whipped out of her.”

“Well,” replied Gaunt, “we've got to take the risk. The *Hirondelle* must travel.”

Yet he knew over-rashness might mean fatal delay, and he watched the hard-driven craft with the vigilant eye of a good seaman. Night came on with steadily rising wind, and still Gaunt held on. The brig proved herself a magnificent sea-boat; but the fury with which she was driven strained every plank in her hull.

By noon on the second day the *Hirondelle*, still carrying the strong south-east gale with her, was off Carthagena; and as she opened the port, the great Spanish two-deckers — some line-of-battle ships amongst them—were crowding out, rolling, or rather wallowing, in the heavy sea. They were clumsily handled, and were making very bad weather of it. One huge battleship was taken aback as soon as she was clear of the port, and was still "in irons" when the *Hirondelle* had run out of sight of her. The salts on the *Hirondelle's* weather bulwarks watched with grim relish the spectacle of the Spanish ships, at all angles with each other, tumbling in the rough seas.

"Jack Spaniard will have a rough time of it," said Johnson to his chum Peters, as they looked through the spray-filled air at the black, tumbling hulls.

"They'll have a worse time of it when old Jack talks to 'em!" was Peters' comment; "old Jack," in the vernacular of the fore-castle, being Admiral Sir John Jervis.

The *Hirondelle* drove on, with the keenest look-outs perched aloft searching the skyline for the lean-

ing topsails of the missing squadron; but there was no sign of Mann; no glimpse of the stems of the British seventy-fours fighting their way eastward against sea and gale to rejoin the admiral, and Gaunt's heart grew heavier every hour.

Gibraltar was reached, but the bay, at a glance, was seen to be empty. Gaunt ran in for news, and the brig lay-to while he pulled ashore. His brow was black with care and anger as he sprang on the deck when returning, and gave the order to fill and run on through the Straits.

"Yes," he told Fraser, "Mann, with seven line-of-battle ships, ran into the bay on October 3, with the whole Spanish fleet lumbering after him in pursuit." The Spaniards could not attack Mann under the guns of Gibraltar, and they had gone east to pick up the detachment at Carthagená; but Mann himself, Gaunt found, had gone not east, but west! It was the gossip of the Mole that he had called a council of war and had, on its advice, abandoned his admiral and sailed for Spithead. At the latest news he was cruising off St. Vincent.

Mann was, no doubt, in a trying position. Was he to follow the Spaniards, pursuing his pursuers, whose fleet would be raised by the ships from Carthagená to twenty-six sail of the line? That was certainly not "prudent" strategy! But "prudence" is sometimes a blunder; it is sometimes even a baseness! Jervis, with only fifteen ships, was left unsupported in a sea in which rode an enemy's fleet of thirty-eight line-of-battle ships.

Mann's nerve had once before failed badly. In August he was hanging off Cadiz with orders to watch the French squadron lying there; but as soon as he knew the Spanish fleet was at sea he had abandoned his post. "He should not have quitted his position before Cadiz," wrote Jervis, "till he saw the combined fleet under sail. . . . But if I were to tell him so he would die instantly!"

When he ran into Gibraltar Mann found himself once more in a cruel position. Duty and honour required him at all risks to rejoin Jervis off Toulon; but the great Spanish fleet lay rolling over leagues of sea somewhere within the Straits, betwixt the too anxious-minded Mann and his admiral. Then, after some days of hesitation, he turned the bowsprits of his ships west instead of east, and thus made the evil choice which blighted his name.

Gaunt drove eagerly on upon Mann's tracks, the light-heeled *Hirondelle* passing everything on its way; and off Cape St. Vincent—on the very waters where four months later Jervis and Nelson were to crush the great fleet that so alarmed Mann, and win undying fame—Gaunt found the British squadron under easy sail. With the signal "Despatches for the admiral" flying, Gaunt ran on to the flagship, the *Windsor Castle*, a majestic three-decker, carrying ninety-eight guns, with castle-like poop, towering masts, and vast spread of yards. Gaunt quickly reached the quarter-deck of the flagship, reported himself, and was informed the admiral would see him presently.

Whilst he waited and fretted on the flagship's poop, the officer of the watch came up.

"Why, Gaunt," he cried, "I thought you were in the West Indies."

They were old chums, and the two young men clasped hands heartily.

"So I was, Steele," answered Gaunt; "but I have been hunting your admiral." And then the feeling which had burdened Gaunt so long broke out. "What are you fellows doing on the wrong course, with your bowsprits towards England? You ought to be beating up with all sail set for Toulon instead of loitering here."

"Aye, Gaunt," answered Steele, dropping his voice; "we know that well enough. And if a vote were taken in the gunrooms we should be off Toulon to-day. Why, the very Jacks in the forecastle say the girls on the Hard at Portsmouth will jeer at them. But 'anxious Bob'—" "anxious Bob" being the title by which Rear-Admiral Sir Robert Mann was familiarly known throughout the fleet—"has held a council of war. Now in a council of war every man can answer for himself, but he can't answer for the rest. I believe that each captain, if he had been alone, would have taken his ship back to Toulon at all risks. 'Anxious Bob' himself, if he had only been lieutenant of the watch instead of rear-admiral of the fleet, would have been as hot as anybody else to rejoin the admiral. But he had the squadron on his nerves; and a council of war . . ."

Here a smart reefer came up and reported that the rear-admiral would see Commander Gaunt.

The rear-admiral was a distinguished-looking man, with dark features, and black hair frostily tipped with grey. There were sensitive lines about his mouth, an aspect of care on his brow, a querulous, half-melancholy look in his eyes.

"Well, sir," he said, "you're lucky to get through the Gut without being snapped up by the Spaniards."

"There is no Spaniard afloat, sir," Gaunt answered quietly, "that could catch the *Hirondelle*."

"And is Sir John coming out after you?" asked the rear-admiral, with the despatches lying still unopened before him.

"No, sir; he is hanging on at San Fiorenzo, counting on your rejoining him."

Mann frowned, then laughed uneasily, but, without speaking, broke the seal of the packet lying on the table.

"Did you see anything of the Spaniards?" he asked presently.

"Yes, sir; they were coming out of Carthagena, and were making a very unseamanlike job of it. Our ships will sail round them."

"Did Sir John send any verbal message?"

"I was to report anything I saw of the enemy, and to tell you he expected you every hour. As soon as you joined, he would try conclusions with French and Spanish both."

"But he knows that De Langara is in the Medi-

terranean with nineteen ships of the line, and he will break up all the blockades, and Brueys' squadron in Toulon will join him."

"Yes, sir," said Gaunt quietly; "he knows all that. And," he added, with designed bluntness, "that is why he is waiting for you. He finds himself with two-thirds of his fleet in front of an enemy's force of thirty-eight ships of the line."

Mann frowned. "I need not discuss that with you, sir," he said curtly. "You can go back to your ship."

"But is there no answer for the admiral?"

"You will not return to him. I want a despatch boat, and you will remain under my flag. It would be making a present of you to the Spaniards," he added more pleasantly, "to send you into the Mediterranean again with twenty-six Spanish line-of-battle ships on the other side of the Gut."

"But, sir, the *Hirondelle* can slip through," urged Gaunt. "And," he added, with a deeper ring in his voice, "I would rather lay her bones and my own at the bottom of the Straits than fail Admiral Jervis. He is facing terrible risks, and he will want to know where one-third of his fleet is."

Mann's face grew black with anger.

"You are impertinent, sir. A sailor may be willing to risk his own life; and if that were all, God knows," he said, as he walked hurriedly to and fro, "I should be in the Mediterranean to-day."

Then he turned and looked at Gaunt. For a moment it was not the rear-admiral and a junior

lieutenant confronting each other, but simply two English seamen.

"It's a little thing," Mann repeated, "to give one's own life for the flag; but I have to think of others. I must not fling away a squadron. And when the fleets of three nations are threatening us, England is sure to need every ship she has."

"But what about Sir John?" asked Gaunt steadily. "You may fling away the admiral, sir."

"Yes, yes; I know." Then Mann broke out: "I would rather be there than here. You are lucky, Commander Gaunt, to have only your brig to be concerned about; but I must think of the squadron. I have no right to take the ships in."

Then he checked himself abruptly.

"But I need not discuss this with you, sir; we are wandering into unnecessary realms. Go back to your brig. You are not to return to the admiral. We bear up for Spithead in the morning, and you will be required as a despatch-boat."

Gaunt tried to veil the mutinous look that leaped into his eyes. To sail so tamely for England, and leave Sir John waiting in vain for his return; to turn his back on what he knew would be great events—never! But Mann might guess his intentions, and put him under arrest, and send another commander to the brig. So he saluted in respectful silence, and left the cabin.

But Mann was quick and observant; he had caught and read the sudden flash of purpose in the young seaman's eyes.



“‘YOU ARE IMPERTINENT, SIR’”

“I believe that young fellow will try to make a bolt for it,” he said to himself, when Gaunt had left the cabin. “Well,” he added, with a sigh, “I envy him! Hanged if I wouldn’t do it myself!”

CHAPTER X

BLUFFING THE SPANIARDS

“Like leviathans afloat
Lay their bulwarks on the brine.”

—CAMPBELL.

IT was growing dark as Gaunt sprang on the deck of the *Hirondelle*. The wind had swung round to the north, and was blowing freshly; the quick-footed brig was reduced to jib and topsails to keep her position on the quarter of the bluff-bowed *Windsor Castle*.

“Let her fall off a little,” said Gaunt quietly to the man at the wheel, as he walked aft.

His mind was made up. In an hour it would be dark; he would slip away under the cover of the night from the squadron, and make all sail westward to rejoin Sir John Jervis. He might be court-martialled and broken for disobeying Mann’s orders; but he would take the risk. He was young and chivalrous. The call of honour and of duty seemed to him imperative. In the rush of feeling he grew generously reckless. He said nothing to Fraser in explanation of his order to the man at the wheel; he would not take him into his counsels, or drag him into any trouble. But Litton was signal midship-

man, and it was impossible to leave him out of the conspiracy.

"Litton," he said, "the *Hirondelle* hasn't got a number given her yet, and if the *Windsor Castle* wants to signal to us to-night they'll hardly know how to do it, and will have to try some odd experiments. Don't be too eager to guess that any queer combination of flags or of lights from the flagship spells the *Hirondelle*."

Litton glanced quickly at his commander; his eyebrows lifted expressively, and an odd light leaped into his sharp eyes. He had seen the mood of gloomy silence in which Gaunt had returned from the flagship, and the frown that clouded his brows. Something was wrong; something that vexed even Gaunt's cool temper, and perplexed his sense of duty. The boy's nimble wit leaped to the true conclusion.

"The beggars are leaving old Jervis to face the odds alone," he said to himself. "They want to keep us to run errands for them, and Gaunt is going to give them the slip. I should think so! Hurrah for Gaunt and the *Hirondelle*! I'll read their signals for them," he whispered to himself, with a cheerful grin.

Meanwhile the fast and weatherly *Hirondelle* was, somehow, widening her distance from the flagship, though Gaunt himself stood by the helmsman, and from time to time gave a brief order. Seven bells had gone, a tiny thread of sound floating down from the *Windsor Castle*, now showing vaguely like some gigantic ghost in the gloom. A line of slowly-

heaving lights marked the position of the other ships. Just then a lantern waved from the quarter of the flagship. Litton was gazing idly at it over the bulwarks, with an air of absolutely detached interest.

"Litton," said his fellow-mid, "that's meant for us; the admiral is signalling to the *Hirondelle*."

"For us!" replied Litton, with lazy scorn. "Young man, you don't know the A B C of signals! That's the admiral saying 'Good-bye' to the whole Mediterranean."

And with that dancing point of light still gleaming from the flagship's mizzen rigging, the *Hirondelle* fell off before the wind, and melted like a wisp of vapour into the gathering blackness of the night. In the morning the disappearance of the brig was reported to the rear-admiral; Mann directed it to be logged, but made no comment.

"The captain of that brig is a gallant young fellow," ran his thoughts; "I should be sorry to break him."

Then, in spite of himself, some deeper feeling stirred in Mann's mind. He clenched his hand; he felt for one generous moment he would rather be on the deck of the *Hirondelle*, running back to join his admiral, than flying a rear-admiral's flag from the peak of the *Windsor Castle*, and ignobly steering for England with all the sanctions of a council of war.

"I envy that young scamp and his brig," he said to himself.

Meanwhile, with the keen north-west wind on her

beam, and every inch of canvas spread, the *Hirondelle* flew steadily eastward. The spray drove like sleet over her; her lee bulwarks were almost under water; but Gaunt, with restless energy, drove the gallant craft in spite of groaning timbers and spray-scoured deck. He ran at night through the Gut without notice or challenge, and kept south of Majorca, making for San Fiorenzo Bay.

On the fourth day, when the grey light came pouring over the dark floor of the sea, the whole of the skyline ahead was seen to be pricked with the topsails of some great fleet. The line of leaning, silvery points, going with the wind, stretched, with irregular intervals, right across the course of the *Hirondelle*. It was plainly the Spanish fleet running on a course to pass to the east of Minorca.

Gaunt climbed into the brig's foretopmast, and studied the situation long and keenly. The weatherly *Hirondelle* could have run across the head of the moving Spanish line; but the rocky islets off the southern end of Minorca made this perilous. To run to leeward and pass the rear of the Spanish line, on the other hand, would take the brig out of her course. If chased, he might be driven on the coast of Sardinia.

Gaunt took a daring decision. "Fraser," he said quietly to his lieutenant, "we'll bluff the Spaniards! The *Hirondelle* is as French-looking still in rig and build as though she had just been turned out of dock at Dunkirk; and it will be easy to make her completely French in appearance from stem to stern.

We'll run clean through the Spanish fleet. Turn up all those French 'duds' we've got, and rig out the men in them. Slacken the braces and stays; let your yards go off a little. Clear away those hammocks from the waist, and hang out a week's washing from the jib-halliards and the foremast stays. Slovenliness is, for the French, a sea-going quality, and we'll make the *Hirondelle* as ragged as a French privateer."

Fraser received the orders with a smile which was half a sigh, and set promptly about his task. The news that Jack Spaniard was going to be tricked was received with cheerful comments in the fore-castle, and the men entered into the business with much humorous relish while the brig ran steadily on.

But it was more than a daring thing, it seemed an act of pure madness, to bear right down on that flock of mighty ships, all of them enemies, and any one of which could have sunk the little *Hirondelle* with a single broadside. Yet, as Gaunt coolly judged, safety lay in audacity. And certainly no more audacious spectacle could be imagined than that offered by the English brig. She was not so much tempting Fate as mocking it! But steadily the little *Hirondelle* ran on with an air of easy confidence which might well have tricked keener eyes than those of the Spaniards.

A huge 80-gun ship held the outermost position of the great fleet. She moved slowly and majestically under easy canvas, with bellying royals and topsails, and reefs in her mainsail. The *Hirondelle*, with a

French flag at her peak, kept a course which would carry her under the Spaniard's stern. Presently, as the brig neared the great ship, an officer climbed slowly to her castle-like quarter, and stood watching the brig as she came up, and, with a sheer to starboard, passed under the carved and gilded stern of the Spaniard.

Gaunt had carried out the disguise of the brig with artistic completeness. Nothing more thoroughly French than her aspect could well be imagined. She wore an unbuttoned and slovenly aspect from stem to stern. A dozen pairs of patched trousers were fluttering in the rigging for'ard; the braces were slack, the yards at slightly diverging angles. A score of seamen in red caps were lounging about the deck. The men in the watch off duty were sitting in a group near the foremast getting their breakfast. A red-capped seaman with a coil of rope about his shoulders was lazily climbing the foremast rigging, while a youthful officer, also in a red cap—young Litton—was abusing him in shrillest French. All the Spanish officer saw was a wicked-looking craft—French in every detail—lying down to the wind and running boldly past the line-of-battle ship's stern, with the tricolour at her mizzen and a cluster of flags—plainly some French and not very intelligible signal—at her peak.

“What ship is that?” came in long-drawn Spanish syllables from the high poop of the great ship.

“Le corsaire *Hirondelle*,” Gaunt cried back in

French, "with despatches," he added a moment later, "for His Excellency the Spanish admiral."

Gaunt's French was beyond suspicion; and while Litton, in French—shriller, but equally voluble—stormed at the seamen in the rigging forward, Gaunt gesticulated and shouted sonorous compliments to "our brave Spanish allies" from the taffrail aft. As the brig swept past the stern of the Spaniard the name *San Ilgondo*, in huge glittering letters, could be read. The first risk was past!

The first challenge was, of course, the most perilous. When the *San Ilgondo* had been safely passed, the danger of the run through the fleet seemed little. So athwart the slowly moving procession of giant ships the audacious *Hirondelle* ran, dipping the tricolour as she passed each ship in turn. The drifting giants, as a matter of fact, took no notice of her. She had been challenged by the outermost ship and allowed to pass; she was no doubt a French despatch boat. So Gaunt was able, with perfect security, to count the guns of ship after ship as, with courteously dipping flag, the brig slipped past the quarter of each.

Now it was the *Neptuno*, of eighty guns; the *Bahama*, of seventy-four; the *San Genaro*, of the same rating; a bigger ship still, the *Principe de Asturias*, of 112 guns.

On the *Hirondelle* herself the seamen forward stared at each great ship in turn, and criticised her with rough shrewdness.

"Look at her braces," growled Peters, as one

dishevelled monster, the *Mexicano*, of 112 guns, pitched heavily in the sea to leeward. "If the old *Victory's* yards were trimmed like that, the back of every man in the watch would be scratched."

Yet there was an air of majesty in the great ships, with their quarters like castles, and their huge breadth of beam, which sometimes hushed criticism on even those rough lips. Nobody in the English fleet ever before had the same opportunity of studying so close at hand a Spanish fleet under sail; and the spectacle was curiously picturesque. Strange figures were painted on the bellowing mainsails. The hulls had a sort of cliff-like vastness, with one menacing line of guns rising above another. Some ships were painted a funereal black, like knights in sable armour; others were a blaze of colour—scarlet and yellow. The richly decorated quarters of the great Spaniards were scarcely so impressive as their carved figureheads, lifted high in the air above the foam of the cutwater—showing sometimes an angel, with wings outspread; a haloed saint, or helmeted knight, or king with crowned brow. Battle, with these giants, took on an air of mediæval splendour and picturesqueness.

The outermost ship to starboard was a monster of four decks, and all eyes were drawn to her as the brig ran towards her.

"That must be the *Santissima Trinidad*," said Gaunt. "She carries 130 guns, and is the biggest ship afloat. If we get past her we're safe;" and the sense that the run through the enemy's fleet was

coming to its most perilous moment sent a hush along the deck of the *Hirondelle*.

The Spaniard was, in fact, the flagship of Don Jose de Cordova, the most picturesque, as well as the biggest and most formidable ship of war the sea at that time carried. It was a floating many-coloured fortress, white and red, with a carved and stately figurehead in white at her bows: and the honest Jacks forward gazed open-mouthed as the little brig drew near this floating fortress.

"What a ship to tow into Portsmouth!" at last said Johnson, after staring long and hungrily at the great Spaniard.

"Aye, boy! Big as she is," was Peters' comment, "let the *Victory* get her on a wind, and she would soon make chips of her!"

Gaunt knew that, at the moment, audacity was still safety, and he closed in to the high and glittering stern of the *Santissima Trinidad* with flag dipped, and stood bare-headed on the brig's taffrail ready to answer any hail. It seemed, at first, as if the huge Spaniard would take no notice of the insignificant little brig dancing, with wet decks, past her stern; then an officer put his head over the quarter, climbed slowly on to the bulwark, and hailed in half-heard Spanish.

Gaunt explained in high-pitched, voluble French, with many shrugs and bows, that the *Hirondelle* was a despatch-boat with despatches for Toulon. As he continued his vociferous explanations and compliments the brig stole onward, the interval widened;

with a final bow Gaunt stepped back to the deck, the *Hirondelle* was safe! It was a great feat. The tiny brig, by mere audacity, had sailed clean through a procession of hostile line-of-battle ships!

Gaunt smiled grimly as he watched the great ships lessening in the distance.

"Talk about singeing the King of Spain's beard," he said to Litton, who stood beside him; "that's tweaking his Majesty's royal nose."

Loud was the chuckling amongst the grinning seamen on the forecastle. "Well done, little *Hirondelle*," said Johnson, slapping the brig's bulwarks in delight; "we've tricked a whole fleet!"

At that moment a sudden jet of white smoke, with a spark of red fire in the heart of it, shot from the bows of the *Santissima Trinidad*. The sound rolled sullenly over the water to the *Hirondelle*; a cluster of flags climbed slowly to the peak of the four-decker.

"The Spaniard is talking," said Gaunt quietly. "For whom is that meant?"

CHAPTER XI

THE ENEMY'S DESPATCHES

“Behold the threaten sails
Borne with the invisible and creeping winds,
Draw the huge bottoms through the furrowed sea,
Breasting the lofty surge.”

—SHAKESPEARE.

A SMART Spanish corvette, a couple of miles to starboard of the main body of the fleet, tacked in response to the signal, and ran down to the Spanish flagship. After a little interval a boat passed betwixt the two ships, then the corvette came round to the wind and bore straight for the *Hirondelle*. From truck to deck she was a pyramid of white canvas, leaning over till, with her outstretched studding-sails, she resembled a dairymaid carrying and balancing a pair of milk-pails.

“The Spaniard has her doubts about us, after all,” said Fraser, “and we are being chased. But we’ve the heels of any Spaniard afloat.”

Gaunt made no reply, but looked keenly round the horizon. The corvette was coming up fast; to windward was a big Spanish frigate. The sea was clear to leeward, but if the brig took that course she

might be driven on to the reefs which are thrust out from the southern extremity of Minorca.

Gaunt had not only a cool head, he had a quick imagination, which enabled him to enter into his enemy's mind and to read with certainty his enemy's plans. He had still rarer gifts: the coolest intellectual certainty about his reading, and an equally steady daring in acting upon it.

"No, Fraser, we'll not run. If we did, that Spaniard to windward might cut us off. The signal from the flagship was no doubt about us; but I don't think it means suspicion. This fellow running down to us is bringing us a message. Perhaps," he added with a laugh, "the Spanish admiral is going to give us charge of some of his despatches. What would you say to that, Litton?" he asked, turning to the midy, who stood near.

Litton's quick wit saw the humorous possibilities of the situation, and he laughed gleefully; and the seamen forward, who were discussing the situation in their own vernacular, and with a certain amount of concern, heard that peal of cheerful mirth from the group of officers aft with a touch of wonder. What was there in the situation to laugh at?

Gaunt by this time was looking with doubtful eyes over the brig.

"Fraser," he said, "send all the biggest men below. Go forward yourself, and let the purser, who talks French like a native, come on deck. They'll send a boat on board, and they mustn't hear a word of English spoken, or see anything that has a very

English look. Of course we may have a brush to get off," he went on meditatively. "So don't cast the guns loose, but load them, and then leave the tompions in, and pass the word forward for the men at a whisper to be ready to run to the guns. If we have to fight, the first blow counts for a great deal. Now we'll give the brig as French a look as possible."

Gaunt himself went round the brig, increasing by a hundred ingenious touches its general air of slovenliness; for, with almost laughable self-complacency, the British seamen of that day regarded smartness as their own particular gift, and slovenliness as the special seagoing characteristic of all Frenchmen! And this latter belief, at least, had some justification in fact.

Presently, as though the desire of the corvette to speak had just been realised, the *Hirondelle* backed her topsail to allow the Spaniard to come up. She was a beautiful model, and, lying over to the wind, travelled at a great pace. Gaunt put down his helm as the Spaniard came up, so that the brig was in movement, and the two vessels ran on side by side within hailing distance.

"Hola the brig," rang in French from the corvette.

Gaunt sprang on to the taffrail, holding by a stay, and answered the hail.

"Lie to and we'll send a boat," came from the corvette.

Gaunt waved his hand in reply, and the *Hirondelle's* topsails were thrown back. The corvette



"HE INTRODUCED HIMSELF AS 'CAPTAIN GIRON'"

came up to the wind with an easy and graceful sweep, dropped her quarterboat into the water, and, with two officers in the stern-sheets, the boat pulled for the brig.

“Let the purser stand at the gangway while the boat is alongside,” said Gaunt to Fraser; “and do you go forward, and see that nobody answers the men in the boat, if any of them try to gossip.”

Gaunt met the two Spanish officers as they came on board with a wealth of florid bows and smiling gestures. He introduced himself as “Captain Giron,” and took them to his cabin. The brig’s papers were asked for, and Gaunt produced, with a flourish, the original French papers of the *Hirondelle*, which were naturally found to be quite satisfactory. One of the officers was the second lieutenant of the corvette, who spoke very little French; the other was a master’s mate from the flagship.

Gaunt was asked for any news of the enemy, and replied with much volubility. The squadron off Cape St. Vincent, when filtered through Gaunt’s French, and the Spaniard’s imperfect knowledge of that language, became a powerful fleet on its way, not *from* the Mediterranean, but *to* it. The Spanish lieutenant had no courtesies to waste, and was impatient of delay: would Captain Giron take Sub-Lieutenant Moralez with despatches from the Spanish admiral to Admiral Brueys in Toulon? His Excellency was anxious to keep his own light vessels with the fleet.

“Captain Giron,” with a new eruption of bows,

was delighted to comply with His Excellency's request. The officer of the corvette, his business finished, made his adieux, jumped into his boat, and pulled back to his ship; the Spaniard swung off on its return, the brig dipped its flag, the courtesy was answered from the corvette, and the *Hirondelle*, lying over to the northerly breeze, flew on its course.

Lieutenant Moralez was shown to a cabin. Gaunt followed him in, and quietly shut the door.

"Señor," he said.

The Spaniard turned swiftly. Something in the tone of Gaunt's voice warned him, somehow, of peril.

"Yes," said Gaunt, answering the startled but unspoken question in his eyes. "It's the fortune of war. I am sorry for the necessity; but you are a prisoner. The *Hirondelle* is an English brig of war."

The dark face of Lieutenant Moralez went suddenly white. The eyes of the two men met; those of Gaunt were as cool as ice, but had a look in them as hard as steel. The Spaniard's eyes were distended with mingled amazement and wrath. But the mastery was with the Englishman! Even if he had not a whole crew at his back he had the stronger will, the more daring temper. The eyes of the Spaniard, with the quickness of a hunted animal, turned to the porthole.

"No," said Gaunt, still in quiet tones, and guessing the unfortunate Spaniard's impulse; "your despatches are my prize."

With a torrent of Spanish oaths the unfortunate sub-lieutenant sat down on the edge of his bunk. Presently the oaths died away to a groan.

"I am a ruined man," he said.

"No," replied Gaunt; "no one can blame you. You are put on board the brig and left here. Your flagship was tricked first."

"That won't help me," said the Spaniard, with conviction. "They'll want a victim, and I shall be sacrificed. But the brig *is* French," he cried, with a fresh burst of incredulity. "This is a jest."

"It *was* French," answered Gaunt, "but it is now under the British flag."

The Spaniard gave up his despatches with deep, mouth-filling curses, and, declining all friendly offers, flung himself with despairing wrath into his bunk.

Two days after this the *Hirondelle*, in the grey dawn, ran into San Fiorenzo Bay, where the fleet of Sir John Jervis lay at anchor.

"Is Mann coming?" asked the lieutenant of the watch, who happened to be an old chum of Gaunt's, as they met for a moment on the quarter-deck of the flagship.

Gaunt shook his head.

"We've a look-out on the peak of the hill, staring westward night and day, and frigates cruising in the offing looking for him," said the lieutenant. "His ears would tingle if he could only hear the litany of curses expended on his name every morning when there is still no sign of his coming to be reported.

It's a case of a big victory, or of clearing out of the Mediterranean altogether, just as Mann turns up, or doesn't turn up. What is the beggar doing?" he asked, with irreverent emphasis.

Gaunt shook his head once more. He must give his news first to the admiral. And just then a marine called him to the admiral's cabin.

Jervis was a man of changing moods, and it was plainly his dark hour when Gaunt stood respectfully, cap in hand, at the table where he sat. The admiral waited a moment, then asked abruptly :

"Where are your despatches?"

"I have none, sir."

"Didn't you find the rear-admiral?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"Cruising off Cape St. Vincent."

The brow of the admiral gathered a new blackness at the reply.

"Yes?" he said.

"He had decided to sail to Spithead, sir. He would not risk his squadron by returning to the Mediterranean. He held a council of war of the captains of the ships"—here Gaunt stopped; the eyes of Jervis gleamed with a fire so sudden and so fierce that for a moment the young seaman's speech was arrested.

"Go on!" said Jervis grimly.

Gaunt told his story, and added, frankly, that Mann refused to risk the brig by sending it back with despatches, and had ordered him to attach

himself to his squadron. Jervis for a while made no comment, but sat with frowning brows and abstracted eyes. It was plain that in imagination he saw the tossing floor of the sea, Cordova's great ships coming through the Gut, new squadrons pouring out from Carthage and Toulon, the huge fleet assembling.

The stern and absorbed meditation of the admiral was so plain that Gaunt stopped and waited in silence.

"Why are you here, sir?" asked Jervis presently.

Gaunt flushed at the blunt and unexpected question. "I held it my duty, sir, to bring you the news."

Jervis made no sign, but presently asked:

"Did you see anything of the Spaniards?"

Gaunt told how he had fallen in with the Spanish fleet, and had run through it flying the French flag. He then told the story of the capture of Sub-Lieutenant Moralez.

"I brought you, sir, no despatches from Admiral Mann, but here are, instead, the Spanish admiral's despatches intended for Toulon."

Jervis looked at them, but did not touch them.

"I disobeyed Rear-Admiral Mann," Gaunt added. "For, as I read my duty, it was to rejoin you with the intelligence I had." Then Gaunt waited for those iron lips to speak.

"Discipline is obedience," said Jervis, at last, using a favourite formula. "Rear-Admiral Mann was your superior officer, and had a right to command you. He may break you for disobedience. But I shall

not punish you for returning to the fleet. You were lucky to get past the Spaniards, and these despatches may be of value. Report in detail the observations you made of the enemy's fleet to Captain Calder," and Gaunt found himself dismissed.

He was seaman enough not to complain that the stern old admiral had wasted no word of praise on him for the news he brought, or for the ruse by which he had tricked the Spaniards. He had risked a court-martial by disobeying Rear-Admiral Mann, and it was enough that the implacable Jervis had left him in command of the *Hirondelle*.

Two days afterwards the look-out on the hill above San Fiorenzo Bay reported the topsails of a great fleet in the offing. Don Jose de Cordova and Admiral Brueys had effected a junction. Toulon had added its quota to the gathered Spanish squadrons. Here was the largest fleet the Mediterranean had ever seen—an aggregate of thirty-eight sail of the line with over twenty frigates, with Toulon as a base, within striking distance of Jervis, who was lying quietly with fifteen ships in San Fiorenzo. Still the British admiral made no movement, and the combined fleets ventured on no attack. Jervis resembled an angry lion in his lair, and the hunters shrank from disturbing him. Jervis knew it was a fine-weather fleet which hung in the offing, and the stormy November gales were certain, every now and again, to drive them off, and give him a chance of safe withdrawal. And his fierce temper found an

iron relish in lying thus without sign of concern within striking distance of an enemy twice his strength.

But the British position grew every hour more perilous. French troops had landed in Corsica; they would soon be able to cut off supplies from the British fleet in the bay, and even to open fire on them from the hills which overlooked the port.

Jervis, at last, with leisurely and iron coolness, gathered up his transports, took off the British garrison with all their stores in Bastia, and called in his scattered cruisers. Stormy weather during the last days of October drove the enemy's ships into Toulon; and on November 2, Jervis, with his line-of-battle ships and a huge convoy of transports, put out from San Fiorenzo for Gibraltar. The Mediterranean was abandoned!

A little later the combined French and Spanish fleets put out of Toulon and took their lumbering course to the west. They were following, but not too closely, on the heels of Jervis; and since the hostile fleets were thus crowding into the narrow waters of the Straits, the rough jostle of battle was both near and inevitable. More than twenty line-of-battle ships were lying at Brest. A junction of these with the great fleet now coming up from Toulon would create an irresistible force.

But on December 6, the Spanish ships, ill-found and ill-manned, put into Carthagena; the French Admiral, Villeneuve, with five line-of-battle ships and a squadron of frigates, kept on his way. This was a fatal blunder in tactics. It flung away the

combination already effected, and broke Don Jose de Cordova's great fleet into fragments.

On the British fleet lying at Gibraltar the dawn of December 10 broke wild and threatening. A gale from the E.S.E. was rising fast. By noon it had become a hurricane, hooting and raving over the Rock. The ships in the bay, with topmasts housed, were pitching wildly at their anchors. A furious sea was raging in the Straits. All day the storm raved, till on the low-drifting clouds, the spray-filled air, the whirling gusts of rain, the darkness of the coming night was falling, making a scene of the wildest possible character.

Suddenly, across the mouth of the bay, through flying mist and tempest, came the tossing shape of a great ship. It showed the barest patch of canvas, and was pitching furiously with wet decks and slanting masts in the wild sea. Clouds of white spray blew almost to its masthead; the green waves seemed to climb the black sides of the rolling hull and take possession of its empty decks. It was a French 80-gun ship, the *Formidable*, carrying the flag of Admiral Villeneuve. For a brief space it was dimly visible; then it vanished, swallowed up of tempest and mist! But another ship came in its track, and another, and yet another, with struck topmasts and rolling hulls. A fleet was running past in the storm!

Was it the combined French and Spanish fleets, making for Brest, and for a combination which would drive the British flag from the narrow seas them-

selves? It was difficult to identify the wind-driven ships, as, in wild and hurrying procession, they appeared and vanished. Jervis himself, however, had no doubts.

"No Spaniard," he said, "would be at sea in this weather if he could help it. This is the French squadron."

As the night deepened, the tempest and sea grew wilder. The *Hirondelle* was anchored in comparative shelter; and Gaunt, wrapped up warmly from head to foot, was watching the white-capped waves from the lee of the mainmast, when a shout from the look-out made him turn his head. A British line-of-battle ship, lying almost on her beam ends, came drifting past. Gaunt could see the officer on the break of the quarter-deck, leaning forward in the act of shouting some order; men were tailing on to the yard-tackles, others, with an officer directing them, were busy at the cable forward. It was the *Courageuse*, a 74-gun ship, torn from her anchorage.

"There goes the poor old *Curry-juice*," said Peters, "bound for the Spanish batteries, or for the bottom of the Straits."

Gaunt sprang into the rigging and watched the ill-fated ship as she drove past. By cool seamanship she was brought up a little short of the batteries, and her anchor dropped. But no cable could hold that great rolling hull against such a sea as then raged. The night was fast darkening, but Gaunt through the haze and gloom could see one top-sail after another dropped, and with slanting decks

half-buried in the wild sea the doomed ship drove out into the Straits. To run with the gale was to blunder into the French squadron which had just passed, and the *Courageuse* was last seen standing towards the Barbary coast. Before midnight the ill-fated ship was lying in fragments on the rocks, and more than five hundred of her crew were drowned.

CHAPTER XII

ON THE HEELS OF THE FRENCH

“Nobly, nobly Cape St. Vincent to the North-West died away;
Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz Bay;
Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;
In the dimmest North-East distance dawned Gibraltar grand
and grey.”

—BROWNING.

BY midnight the gale had begun to slacken, and a master's mate, drenched with spray and rain, reached the *Hirondelle*, and brought orders from the admiral to Gaunt. At the earliest possible moment he was to run out of the bay and follow the French squadron that had run past in the storm. Jervis was confident it was destined for the West Indies, and the *Hirondelle* must outsail Villeneuve's heavy line-of-battle ships, and carry information of the coming peril to Jamaica and the Barbadoes.

“The Barbadoes,” thought Gaunt; “why should the French go there? No! It's Brest they are making for.”

Gaunt was a daring seaman, and he had a sailor's characteristic faith in the seagoing qualities of his own craft. The night was still black, the tempest was raving afresh, the moonless sky was filled with

flying clouds—mere drifting continents of blackness—when the *Hirondelle*, under a single jib, and with reefs in her topsails, crept out of the shelter of the bay, and plunged into the wild tumult of the Gut.

Scanty as was the canvas shown, the brig ran fast before the driving squalls. The great seas pursued her, rising in cliff-like masses, in the blackness of the night, and threatening to leap on her quarter. The rigging, shrilling under the ceaseless whip of the wind, resembled a many-toned harp, each stay and shroud with a separate note. The hull of the gallant craft groaned through every plank. Spray hissed incessantly athwart the decks. The roar of the seas, as they leaped at the side of the brig, their crash as they fell on the deck, had in them a note of thunder. Wind and ship and sea made up together a wild oratorio of tormented sound. Johnson, with a quartermaster, was at the helm, and it taxed all their skill and strength to keep the brig to her course.

Presently, in the wind-vexed blackness ahead, through which the hard-driven brig was flying, a point of light which came and went was dimly visible; then another, and yet another. A line of dancing points of fire ran across the scroll of the darkness. It was the French fleet!

Then came the grey dawn, breaking high and pale and misty on the wild seas and the labouring ships. The Frenchmen were running before the gale, and were making very bad weather of it.

It was a wild scene, worthy of the pencil of a

great painter. The half-hidden sun flung a faintly luminous haze of pallid light over the wide stretch of angry waters. The heavy seventy-fours were continually pooped by the pursuing seas, and the green waters, as they broke on their quarter-galleries, threw up columns of white spray, instantly whirled away, like smoke, by the gale.

The *Hirondelle* crept to windward of the Frenchmen, and hung there all the wild day. Gaunt felt he must know what course the Frenchmen would take, before he bore up for the West Indies. The Frenchmen, with reefed courses, ran westward from Cape St. Vincent for many a league; then, answering a sullen gun, and a flutter of wet flags from the masthead of the admiral, the great ships slowly tacked, bringing the wind on their beam; and, lying down to the gale till their lee bulwarks were under water, and on their slanting hulls the waves broke as if on so many rocks, they beat up to the north. That way lay Brest!

Gaunt hung on to the French till they had run past Lisbon and Oporto, and the rollers of the Bay of Biscay could be felt. Then he put the brig about, and beat back to the Straits. Villeneuve plainly had no designs on the West Indies; he was making for Brest, to join the squadron there in one or other of the many foolish "invasions" of Ireland those distracted days saw attempted.

The combined fleets, it was thus clear, had no common strategy. No single combining brain governed their movements. They might have closed

on Jervis and his fifteen ships in San Fiorenzo Bay with a combined force of nearly forty; but the French had sailed off into space on an adventure of their own, and Don Jose de Cordova was left to settle affairs with the British fleet unassisted. And he did so—at Cape St. Vincent—a few weeks later, to his own sore loss!

Gaunt brought the good news to his admiral, and was kept for weeks flying on one sea-errand after another. Then he was caught, as spectator, though not as actor, in one of the greatest sea-battles in history.

On February 12, 1797, the *Hirondelle* had cleared the Straits, running before a strong east wind, on her course to rejoin the fleet then cruising off Cape St. Vincent. The night was clouded and black; about 11 o'clock the look-out forward reported lights right ahead. Gaunt went to the brig's head, and found a score of faint lights—mere pin-points of flame—pricking the darkness before him. They increased in number till a thread of fiery beads, with many tangled knots in it, stretched athwart the whole horizon.

Gaunt shrouded every light, put the sharpest eyes in the brig on the look-out, and ran boldly on.

Presently one great hull, a mysterious shape, showing black against the black sky, with little patches of yellow light fretting its bulk—was discernible; then another, and yet another! The *Hirondelle* was plainly running into a fleet!

A dozen shadowy giants, set in this fashion with points of flame, were passed. Presently, far to windward, came the flash of a gun; the sound of it rolled

sullenly through the night, and over the black floor of the sea. A gun to leeward answered. Again and again those waves of iron sound ran through the darkness. The great ships were calling to each other across night and space!

Gaunt reduced his canvas, and hung to windward of the unknown ships. They were the enemy's fleet, he knew; but were they running west, to fall on the West Indies; or would they bear up to the north, for Cadiz? Or were they following the track which Villeneuve had taken a fortnight earlier? Were the two fleets, French and Spanish, to make at Brest that combination—with the Dutch added—which they had flung away in the Mediterranean, and so cover a descent on Ireland or England?

Gaunt's quick brain guessed this to be the strategy on hand; and his guess was right. Don Jose de Cordova was on his slow way to Brest, and a junction with the French and Dutch fleets. What puzzled Gaunt was that the unknown ships crossing his course were running to the south, and that way lay no port. As a matter of fact, the Spanish admiral's seamanship was such that he could only take short flights, and he meant to put in to Cadiz. But he could not make even that port at a first attempt. The strong east wind blew the unwieldy Spaniards past Cadiz; and when the *Hirondelle* caught sight of their lights, they were taking a wide curve to the south, with the design of working back to that port.

Presently the signal guns spoke afresh, filling the

night with their echoes. Then, in response, the lights ahead slowly grouped themselves in new patterns against the darkness. The Spaniards were coming about; and, lying as close to the wind as they could, they bore to the north. The *Hirondelle* was hove-to as one great ship after another—high, shadowy piles of canvas, with lines of fretted lights below them—came slowly past in the gloom. They were plainly beating towards Cadiz; but their leeward drift would carry them far to the west of that port; and Cape St. Vincent, with Jervis cruising off it, was not a hundred miles distant!

Gaunt held on till the day broke, and, in the grey light, the Spaniards were seen still struggling to the north; and, sure now of their destination, the *Hirondelle* shook her courses loose and ran before the wind to Cape St. Vincent with the great news.

A day later the heavy Spaniards were still trying, in a series of curves, to work back to Cadiz; and Jervis, reaching out with his frigates, easterly, caught sight of them. The Spaniards, on their part, as soon as they had a glimpse of the British topsails, gave up Cadiz, and with a gallant impulse bore down to their enemy. The Spanish admiral had the British fleet—little more than half his strength—under his lee; he believed he could crush it, and then take Cadiz as a half-way house to Brest afterwards.

Gaunt had carried his news in; and, on the night of the 13th, the *Hirondelle* was cruising to the east of Cape St. Vincent, with orders to report any signs of the enemy. Early in the night, from the darkness

to windward, came the faint sound of guns. Again and again, at regular intervals, in sullen waves of sound, they could be heard, but always louder and nearer. These calling guns needed no interpretation. The Spaniards were coming down before the wind, groping their way thus through the night, in search of their foes. The dawn would bring battle, and Don Jose de Cordova was holding—or trying to hold—his mighty flock together, in readiness for it.

Those pulses of deep sound, coming from points in the horizon so remote from each other, had a curiously menacing effect. They were voices speaking out of the depths of the night, with battle and death in their iron syllables. What a wide front of battle they represented! And they were calling with ever nearer and more insistent voice!

Gaunt listened with cool, interpreting ear. He could guess, from the guns, the distribution and the course of the Spanish fleet. The Jacks in the fore-castle listened, on their part, with professional interest, and with loud and cheerful calculations of the fight of the morrow. "Old Jarvey," they agreed, "would teach them Spaniards a lesson which would surprise them!" They reckoned with confidence on introducing some of those bellowing Spaniards to windward as prizes to the girls on the *Hard* at Portsmouth.

When the far-stretching lights of the approaching Spaniards could be fully seen, Gaunt ran down to the British fleet with his news. His answer was a brief order to keep clear of the approaching fight, and to

report himself at its close. Gaunt thus found that he was to look on as a spectator, while the two great fleets closed in mortal struggle; and when this was realised, there was much discontent on the brig. For the first time, Litton regretted he had joined the little *Hirondelle*, and did not hide his regret. On the quarter-deck of the majestic *Victory*, or amongst its batteries, he would have been an actor in the fight; now he was condemned to be an idle onlooker. He was marooned!

Gaunt saw the lad's discontented face, and smiled.

"Yes," he said, "this is rough on us. But, Litton, you will have a rare experience. You will see what promises to be one of the greatest sea-fights in history, and see it as from a balloon."

This, however, hardly consoled Litton. "Those fellows in the gunroom of the *Victory*," he grumbled, with a melancholy look, "have got the pull of me to-day."

Battle has an iron etiquette of its own, and Gaunt knew that no Spanish three-decker would fire on the *Hirondelle* unless, indeed, that tiny craft was impertinent enough to begin the firing itself. And, since he could not share the fight, he determined at least to watch it from as near a point as was possible. The Spanish ships were on an E.S.E. course, with the wind on their quarter, and they would cross the bow of the *Hirondelle* to starboard. The British, lying close to the wind, were running almost due south. The two moving lines must intersect, the point of intersection forming the vertex of a sliding

triangle. And the *Hirondelle*, with topsails backed, was in the angle betwixt the two lines.

The British were moving across her bows to port, the Spaniards to starboard. She was a mere atom to be caught betwixt two such gigantic scissor-blades if they should close on her!

CHAPTER XIII.

WATCHING A GREAT SEA-FIGHT

“ They now to fight are gone:
Armour on armour shone,
Drum now to drum did groan;
 To hear was wonder;
That with the cries they make
The very earth did shake;
Trumpet to trumpet spake;
 Thunder to thunder.”

—DRAYTON.

GAUNT, leaving the brig in Fraser's charge, climbed with Litton to the foretopsail yardarm. He sat on the yard, glass in hand, with one arm thrown round the mast; Litton, more eager, stood on the yard itself, holding by a stay, feet and body restless with excitement. The two slowly converging lines of the great fleets lay at that moment with curious distinctness beneath them.

The day had dawned black and hazy; the sea was flecked with huge masses of drifting fog, that now hid, and now revealed, the moving fleets. The Spanish ships seen through the haze bulked like giants. On the deck of the brig itself discipline was, in the excitement of the scene, relaxed. Some of the Jacks had climbed into the rigging, others

clustered in the bowsprit, some were perched on the yards. Lying within the narrowing lines of the great fleets, with their towering canvas, their stately hulls, their tiers of guns, the *Hirondelle* seemed a toy.

For bulk, stateliness, and general majesty of appearance, the Spaniards completely overshadowed the British. They were twenty-seven line-of-battle ships to fifteen, two of them three-deckers. The flagship, the *Santissima Trinidad*, of four decks—the biggest fighting ship afloat—towered above its sister ships, a floating castle. Don Jose de Cordova's ships had the wind on their beam, and their tall masts, with bellying, widespread canvas, and flutter of innumerable flags, gave them a look of aerial vastness.

The British were smaller ships; they as yet flew no colours; they were in fighting rig, with topmasts struck, and lying close to the wind. They seemed small and drab-coloured compared with their enemy.

But one fleet was the perfect expression of disciplined order; the other of sprawling disarray. The British ships moved in two compact lines, with measured intervals, and an aspect of ordered strength — strength governed by a single will. The other fleet represented mere picturesque confusion; a confusion none the less fatal because it was picturesque. The Spaniards, in brief, were a mob; a mob of giants, it is true, but still only a mob.

On the forecastle and in the rigging of the *Hirondelle* the Jacks were picking out the ships, and dis-

cussing them with rough, but shrewd and practical comments. The *Santissima Trinidad*, with its four decks and mighty stem—a floating Titan in white and scarlet—was eagerly scanned. But with even keener interest the British ships were noted and discussed.

"There's the *Culloden* leading," said one sea-veteran; "let Jack Troubridge get to work on those lumping Spaniards, and he will make a pretty average of them."

"And yonder's the old *Victory*," cried Peters; "I'd like to be in her starboard battery, boys! Won't the guns talk there to-day!"

Many of the Jacks were gravely calculating the exact value of the guns each Spaniard carried, when captured and translated into head-money warrants. From this point of view the *Santissima Trinidad*, with its 130 guns, was regarded with much favour—of a proprietary sort! In one group the sailors had come almost to blows over the question whether the *Culloden* or the *Captain* could reduce the Spanish flagship to chips in the shortest space of time—the *Captain*, it may be mentioned, being about half the size of the great Spaniard! That either of the British ships named could perform this feat these simple-minded tars took as a matter of course; it was only a question of which could do it with the greater expedition!

One of the Spaniards had her topmast gone; and this was accepted with much relish as a proof of Spanish seamanship—or of its non-existence.

Gaunt, from his perch high on the brig's foremast, was watching the great panorama of the coming fight with other and graver eyes. The long, scattered line of Spanish ships at one point was broken; there was a gap, growing every moment wider, betwixt a cluster of six great ships leading and the rest of the line. That widening gap might easily be turned into a mortal wound. Did Sir John Jervis see it? Did he understand the great chance it offered?

Just then a flutter of signals at the masthead of the *Victory* caught all eyes. The admiral was "talking" to his fleet; and all voices in the brig were hushed, while the men watched to see what new evolution was ordered. It was a mighty game of chess on which they looked, with line-of-battle ships for pawns and knights; and one of the players was about to "move."

The "move" came quickly. As though under the impulse of a single will the two British lines melted into one, and the fifteen ships—like the shaft of a spear, with the *Culloden* for thrusting-point—were driving straight at the gap on which Gaunt was staring with eager eyes. Even the sailors understood the movement.

"Well done, old Jarvey!" cried Johnson, from the main rigging.

Just then the *Victory* hoisted its colours, and every ship followed its example. A tiny flame of colour ran from masthead to masthead through the British fleet. It had the effect of a challenging gesture, proud and gallant; and at the sight an

involuntary and unrebuked cheer ran along the brig's deck. "Hurrah!" shouted the men from the yardarm.

Gaunt, meanwhile, was watching the scene with compressed lips and eager eyes. The Spaniards plainly saw the peril of that wide gap in their line. The ships to leeward went about and tried to beat up to rejoin their admiral; the ships to windward shook out fresh canvas. The fatal gap was narrowing.

The course of the *Culloden*, that led the British line, took it right across the bowsprit of the leading Spaniard in the main body coming down from the windward. The two ships were fast nearing each other: which would yield, Spaniard or Briton?

Litton, on the topsail yard, danced with anxiety as the two great sea-gladiators neared each other; the seamen on the bowsprit and in the main rigging of the brig fell curiously silent. The first blow of the battle was about to be struck.

As they watched, with fixed and breathless interest, suddenly jets of white smoke ran along the whole length of the *Culloden*, and the smoke was pricked with spear-points of flame. Its starboard batteries were speaking to deadly purpose; and the Spaniard, with a hasty splutter of answering guns, but in much hurry and confusion, fell off before the wind.

"That's one on the nose for Jack Spaniard!" roared Peters exultantly.

But three line-of-battle ships and a two-decker had crossed the bows of the *Culloden* and joined the

dismembered fragment of the Spanish fleet to leeward. This, of course, only made the situation worse for the Spaniards; the division of their fleet was more complete. The two-decker, with all sail set, bore right away, and soon its topsails alone were visible.

Its departure was hailed with groans from the rigging and bowsprit of the brig; the vanishing Spaniard was classed regretfully as so much property unfairly intercepted while on its way to British pockets!

It was just past noon; the British ships were by this time stretched out in a single line like so many beads on a thread—each bead a line-of-battle ship—across the track of the main body of the Spanish fleet. A little cluster of black balls now ran up to the masthead of the *Victory*, and, almost before they broke into signal flags, the *Culloden* tacked, closing on the mass of the Spaniards to windward.

Every British ship in turn, as it reached the same point, followed the lead of the *Culloden*, and, like it, bore up to close with the enemy. The movement had a certain ordered stateliness about it which delighted the watchers on the *Hirondelle*. Sir John was closing on his enemy. One-third of the Spanish fleet was to leeward, and practically out of the fight; the rest was, so to speak, betwixt the closing blades of a pair of scissors.

But presently these tarry critics discovered a fatal defect in the evolution. It was too slow for their impatience! The British ships were apparently

circling round the Spaniards, in place of taking the shortest road to them. Instead of tacking "in succession," why did not the British ships tack simultaneously? Or, as Litton put it with irreverent impatience, addressing his remark to the landscape at large:

"Why doesn't old Jack close on the beggars at once!"

Just at that moment the Spanish ships cut off to leeward made a gallant attempt to rejoin their admiral. A stately three-decker, the *Principe d'Asturias*, bore up to cut through the British line just ahead of the *Victory*.

"Well, I'm blessed," said Peters, as he realised what was being done. "What cheek! Wait, boys, till the old *Victory* speaks! The lads in the port batteries are squinting along their guns just now."

Silence fell on the watching tars as the Spaniard neared the moving British line. The *Victory* hove-to with cool stateliness, as if to wait for its huge antagonist; the *Principe d'Asturias* did the same, her quarter swinging on to the *Victory's* broadside. Suddenly the *Victory's* guns flashed, a ribbon of red flame ran along its whole length; a hail of iron swept over the Spanish ship; and with shattered bulwarks and torn canvas she reeled to leeward.

"Well done the old *Victory!*" shouted a dozen voices from the brig's bowsprit.

"Yes," said Gaunt, "but one plucky Spaniard is through the line."

It was true; one Spanish ship held on her course

gallantly, and, veiled by the smoke, got across the British line and rejoined her admiral.

The main body of the Spanish ships had thus been headed off, and was now running almost before the wind, parallel with the rear of the British line, but in the opposite direction. The head of the British line, to put it briefly, was doubling on the Spanish tail; and Litton was fairly dancing with excitement as he watched the leading British ships—the *Culloden*, the *Blenheim*, the *Prince George*—smiting with furious broadsides the Spanish rear.

But Gaunt's eyes were fixed with a look of stern intentness on the rear of the British line. It was still moving south to the point where the *Culloden* had tacked, while the main body of the Spanish ships, a tumultuous mass, was running north. This double movement must soon disentangle the two fleets; the Spanish van would presently have the sea clear to starboard, and could then run down easterly, with the wind on its quarter, and join the other Spanish ships to leeward; and this move might well change the whole aspect of the fight.

Gaunt watched eagerly for the signal from the *Victory*, which would show that the admiral saw the danger, and was taking some steps to meet it. But no signal came! Clouds of fog and smoke were blowing thickly over the flagship; and the landscape of the fight was hidden. And the Spaniards by this time plainly saw their chance. They were seizing it! They fell off before the wind, and, through the mist and smoke, could be seen on their new course.

In a very brief space of time they would be past the rear of the British line, and their junction with the lee division would be complete.

Litton had ceased to shout excited comments on the performances of the *Culloden*, and was looking with wondering eyes on the changed aspect the battle wore. How did it come to pass that the dismembered sections of the Spanish fleet were on the point of union, and the British fleet was about to be left "in the air"? Even the Jacks below had fallen into puzzled silence as they stared at the spectacle.

And then a murmur ran through the silence. Something was happening! No signal fluttered from the peak of the *Victory* syllabing some order; but the third ship in the British rear, with a commodore's flag at the fore, suddenly fell out of the line. It wore, rounded the ship immediately in its rear, and, running across the bows of the last British ship, bore up straight in the path of the oncoming mass of the enemy's ships.

"That's the *Captain*," cried Johnson, with a curious strain of excitement in his northern burr, "and, lads! Nelson is going to stop the Spaniards!"

The *Captain* was the smallest seventy-four in the fleet. She looked almost insignificant when compared with the great ships, with their high stems and towering piles of canvas, against which she was pitting herself. It was a dwarf setting itself against the rush of a crowd of giants.

The mighty bulk of the *Santissima Trinidad* led

the Spanish van; close behind her came a group of three-deckers. How the men in the rigging and on the bowsprit of the *Hirondelle* watched the meeting of those ill-matched opposites! "It was a fight," as Johnson—who by right of his Scottish training knew his Bible—said afterwards, "betwixt one wee David and half-a-dozen bullying Spanish Goliaths." Litton, on the yardarm, beside his sternly silent commander, was half-sobbing with excitement. "O the little *Captain!*" he kept repeating. "O the little *Captain!*"

The dogged "little *Captain,*" on her part, fell off as the Spaniards came up, so as to bring her whole broadside to bear. Then a line of dancing flame-points ran along her whole length. She was firing venomously into the Spanish four-decker! Again and again, and yet again, those pulses of smoke and fire ran along her sides. Never was fire more swift, deadly, and sustained. It was too hot for the Spaniards! The great ship leading hauled up sulkily on her larboard tack, and commenced to bellow angrily in return; but the movement was a check to the whole Spanish van. The little *Captain* had stopped the Spaniards! The bowsprit and rigging of the *Hirondelle* became vocal once more as the sight was watched.

"By G——," cried one excited voice, "the little one is knocking out the big Spaniard!"

"Well done the *Captain!* O well done, little one!" shouted a score of seamen.

But now two other giants of 112 guns drifted into

the fight, and closing in were thundering from either side on the British ship. At one moment five great Spaniards were emptying broadsides on her. She vanished in that hell of smoke and flame, and a groan, punctuated with many seagoing expletives, ran round the deck of the *Hirondelle* as she disappeared. Litton was half sobbing on his yardarm with fury and grief. Peters had flung his tarpaulin on the deck with mere fury, and was discharging a crescendo of oaths; Johnson, a man of greater self-control, was watching the sight with flashing eyes. That ring of giants must batter the little *Captain* to chips.

"Eh! but the little one is too hard a nut for Spanish teeth to crack," he cried, as though to reassure himself.

"There comes Collingwood," said Gaunt at last, with a deep sigh of relief; and the *Excellent*, moving steadily through smoke and fire, and conned with the coolest and most perfect seamanship, passed along the narrow interval betwixt the much-battered *Captain* and the great Spaniard on her port side. From the brig, only her topmast could be seen above the smoke; but there came in a moment the sound of a broadside so concentrated and fierce that its blast of dreadful sound was heard above all the tumult of the fight.

It was Collingwood opening on the nearest Spaniard. Then the topmasts of the *Excellent* could be seen still moving on, attended by the deep and dreadful thunder of broadsides, until she had reached the

Santissima Trinidad herself, and plunged into a fierce duel with her.

“Hurrah for old ‘Col!’” Peters was shouting in ecstasy. “There comes the *Blenheim*,” cried Litton on his yardarm with delight; “and the *Culloden* is coming up aft, and beginning to smash the Spaniard’s crockery.”

The sound of the battle grew deeper. The centre of the struggle was an island of smoke, within which a dozen great battleships tore and shattered each other. Their broadsides rolled over the sea and flung their iron echoes up to the sky, till all space seemed to be filled and shaken. Each great ship, as it came up, added its giant voice to the tumult. Beneath that murky firmament a thousand great guns were discoursing with iron lips and red tongues of flame to each other.

The sky itself became one vast shaken sounding-board; and the broadsides grew thicker, deeper, and more furious as ship after ship drifted into the smoke. Some of the brig’s crew had heard the sound of battle before—Rodney’s great battle of the Saints, or the First of June, under Howe—but never one in which the fighting was so concentrated to a single point, or of which the tumult was so deep and terrible.

All voices on the brig were now silenced; the men could only watch and listen with straining senses.

Presently the broadsides grew fewer: the smoke began to lift, and one great ship after another drifted into sight. The fight rolled away to the east, with

roar of guns and masses of eddying smoke. As the scene cleared the watchers on the *Hirondelle* saw a cluster of ships, all more or less wrecked, lying side by side.

That to port was instantly recognised by its black and yellow sides; it was the *Captain!* and Litton on the topsail yard fairly groaned as he realised the condition of the gallant little ship.

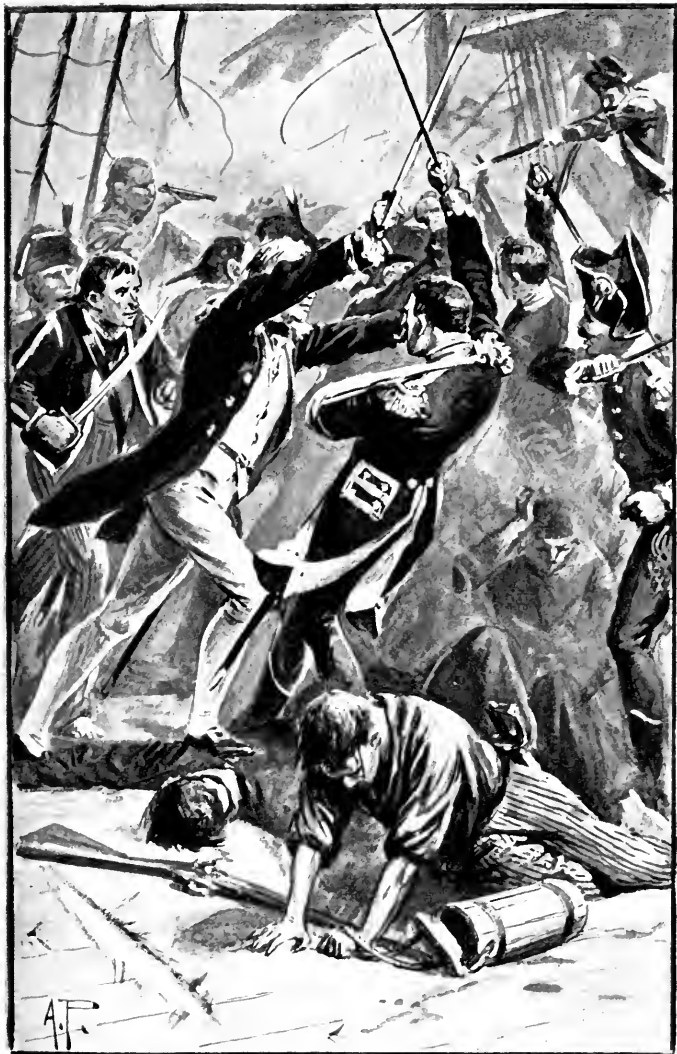
Her foretopmast was gone, her sails were in rags, her jibs had vanished, her bulwarks were jagged and gapped, her shrouds were a tangle of ropes' ends. The two great Spaniards beside her were sadly mauled; but the *Captain* was a mere wreck, so dire was the mischief those dreadful minutes had wrought! The distress aroused in the seamen on the *Hirondelle* by the sight was half pitying and half wrathful; but through both pity and wrath ran a thread of pride.

"Well, they haven't been firing salutes," said Johnson. "The poor little *Captain* is torn to rags; there will be a pretty wiping up on her main deck."

"But she stopped the Spaniards, boys! she stopped the Spaniards," cried another seaman, with a half sob of pride in his voice.

The sorely wounded *Captain* was grinding her sides against a tall Spanish three-decker; and at this moment a tiny thread of figures could be seen clambering up the high bulwarks of the enemy's ship.

"They are boarding," yelled a sailor from the *Hirondelle's* bowsprit! "d——d if the beggars are not boarding!"



“‘THEY ARE BOARDING’”

Then there was a breathless silence, while Litton danced in an agony of excitement upon his yardarm. The line of climbing figures persisted. Some could be seen jumping down on the Spaniard's decks from the end of a projecting yardarm. There was a flash of steel on the quarter-deck of the Spaniard, and little angry puffs of pistol smoke; and then—oh! the joy of it—the great yellow flag of Spain fluttered down.

For a moment the crew of the *Hirondelle* watched that vanishing patch of colour with almost incredulous eyes; then they broke into a fury of cheers. Again and yet again the shouts went up.

“Stop, lads!” cried Johnson. “I'm blessed if they are not going to carry the next ship too. See, the men are going up! Gallant lads! oh! well done the *Captain!*”

Yes; up the second great three-decker the boarders were climbing, and in a space of time incredibly brief its flag in turn fluttered sullenly down. The men on the brig were solemnly shaking hands with each other at the sight. Some were dancing; a dozen tarpaulins were drifting astern, flung there in a marine gladness which could find no other expression; one delighted Jack was solemnly executing a hornpipe on the fore-castle all to himself.

On his yardarm Litton, who had somehow fallen voiceless, was furtively dashing strange moisture from his eyes. He was only a boy. Pride and gladness, and the whole strangling excitement of the scene, had sent the tears tingling to his eyes!

CHAPTER XIV

WAR'S SIGNATURE

“ But things like that, you know, must be
After a famous victory.”

—SOUTHEY.

THE flagship is calling, sir,” hailed Fraser from the deck. As Gaunt came down the rigging eight bells struck; it was four o'clock! The hours had fled unnoticed in the passion and excitement of watching the fight. The *Victory* was busy signalling the fleet, and the number of the *Hirondelle* had just been shown. The brig was to run down to the *Captain*, offer any assistance it could, and bring a report of its condition to the admiral.

All was keenest activity on the brig. There was a passion of curiosity to see the actual effects of the battle, and learn its results; and in a very short time the *Hirondelle* was lying, with topsails backed, to windward of the *Captain*, a boat was lowered, and Gaunt, with Litton by his side, pulled to the ship.

Just as the boat of the *Hirondelle* reached the *Captain* three or four officers were coming down the ladder of the seventy-four, and stepping into a man-of-war's barge lying alongside. The last to descend

was a little active figure, and, as he stepped into the stern-sheets of the boat, "That's Nelson!" ran in a whisper round Gaunt's crew. He looked curiously at the man who already was well known in the fleet, and who had just done a great deed which must make him famous for all time.

The alert set of the head, the nervously active movement of every limb, the thin, intense face, curiously impressed Gaunt. Something of the strain and passion of battle was still on Nelson's features. A spark of its flame was in his solitary eye; it burned in the fierce intentness of his look. He had shared in the rough and tumble of the actual boarding, and there was a rent in the sleeve of his coat, a stain of smoke on his forehead, the scarlet of blood on his knuckles.

"Well, sir," he said to Gaunt, in a high-pitched, slightly nasal voice, as he stood, before taking his seat, in the stern-sheets of his boat, "what do you want?"

Gaunt saluted, and explained his orders.

"See Captain Miller," said Nelson; "I am going to hoist my flag on the *Irresistible*."

He sat down in the stern-sheets, gave a brief gesture, the oars fell into the water, and the boat moved away. The fiery seaman was leaving his prizes, and the disabled *Captain*, and was hurrying to hoist his flag on a new ship, to start in fierce pursuit of the Spaniards, and perhaps capture new three-deckers!

"Yon's a keen little devil!" whispered Johnson to Peters meditatively, as his eyes followed the boat, in

the stern-sheets of which sat the oddly boyish figure of the hero of the great fight.

Gaunt proceeded to board the *Captain*. He noticed, as he climbed her side, that two of her ports were battered into one; splintered holes in her black timbers showed where the Spanish shot had torn their way; through a port he saw the body of a sailor lying—the posture, the outstretched arms, showed that the man was dead. When Gaunt reached the deck he found that the *Captain's* bulwarks for a long stretch were in splinters; the wheel had been shot away; the foretopmast was gone. Two dismantled guns lay on the upper deck; there were red splashes, showing where men had died. Her forecastle was a tangle of ropes and torn canvas.

Captain Miller stood at the break of the quarter-deck, giving orders. Already the routine of the ship was beginning to assert itself. The gunner, with his mates, was busy trying to secure the tackle of one of the guns; on the forecastle the boatswain was setting hands to work to knot the torn rigging and to unbend the damaged mainsail; the carpenter and his mates were sorting out a bundle of shot-plugs. The storm and strain of battle sorely relaxed the discipline of the ship, and the first business of a good officer was to restore it. But Gaunt could still see traces of how the passion of the fight had affected the men.

Little groups of the crew were sitting, or lying about, in every posture of exhaustion; many had

smoke-blackened faces ; some were half-naked as they had fought their guns. The wounded had already been carried below, but had left grim traces of their wounds on the blood-splashed deck.

The high, carved quarters of the *San Nicholas* towered above the *Captain's* deck, and Gaunt looked curiously at the broken upper quarter gallery window, shattered by the blow of a British musket, through which the boarders—Nelson himself amongst the foremost—had jumped into the Spaniard's cabin. It was but a little and jagged crevice through which such a fiery jet of battle had spurted ! A group of sailors were clearing the spritsail yard, which had caught in the mizzen rigging of the *San Nicholas*, and along which another party of British boarders had found a way to the deck of the Spaniard.

Gaunt found that Captain Miller needed no help. "A frigate," he said, "was coming up to take the *Captain* in tow. The list of killed and wounded was not yet complete;" but Miller said—in a melancholy tone which was in odd conflict with the gleam of pride in his eye—that "the *Captain* had lost heavily; more, he was afraid"—the tone of his voice almost implied he was about to say "hoped"—"than any ship in the fleet."

Miller was right; the *Captain*, as a matter of fact, had more killed and wounded on her decks than any other three ships in the fleet put together; and in the grim, not to say barbarous, code of that time this was an enviable distinction! It was at least proof that the crew had drunk deep of the red wine

of battle. The officer in command of the marines was killed, and more than a score of the men. The *Captain* had fired, according to the gunner's report, 150 barrels of gunpowder. Captain Miller was busy watching the working parties of the crew, and giving orders while supplying these particulars, and Gaunt soon took his leave.

Before returning to the brig he leaped into the main chains of the *San Nicholas*, and clambered on board the great prize. He found British marines on guard there, and the disorder of the deck was picturesque. He stood for a moment before the shattered cabin door through which the boarding party, led by Nelson, had broken their way to the deck. Its panels still showed on the inner side the deep dints made by the butts of British muskets. On the Spaniard's broad, but not too clean, decks were here and there wide red pools of blood; a line of dead bodies, over which a tarpaulin had been thrown, lay under the bulwarks.

Above even the *San Nicholas* towered the huge *San Josef*, the other captured Spaniard. A midddy looked over the quarter-deck rail, as Gaunt was about to climb up, and said orders were against any one coming on board, except on duty. Gaunt looked along the huge bulk of the Spanish ship, the lines of frowning guns, the massive bulwarks. What daring, on the part of a handful of British seamen, to climb up that great wooden fortress, carrying not far short of a thousand men, and claim it as a prize!

Gaunt, with the quick and trained eye of a sea-

man, noted one amazing detail. The tompions were still in the quarter-deck guns of the *San Josef*! Here was a ship that had lain in the storm-centre of a great battle for more than an hour; she had shot, and been shot at, on every side, and having fought her fight she had hauled down her flag. And her quarter-deck guns had never been fired! The wooden tompions were still lying harmlessly within their iron lips. The fire of the British ships had been so terrible and close that it had driven the Spanish crews from these particular guns before they were able to fire a shot!

Gaunt pulled back to the brig, and then ran down to the flagship with his report, which received scanty attention. The seascape of the battle was at that moment taking a new shape. The four captured ships—two of them of 112 guns—were lying in sullen helplessness; the British ships were scattered in irregular groups, as they had been left by the fierce eddies of the fight. The nine Spanish ships to leeward were beating up to the scene of action, but not by any means with undue eagerness. Still they constituted a fresh and formidable force, and brought with them a certain menace, and Jervis signalled to discontinue action and form line to cover the prizes, and the British ships were slowly obeying this order.

This gave the two fragments of the Spanish fleet so fatally dismembered the chance of reuniting. The huge *Santissima Trinidad* was out of the fight. For more than an hour no red flashes of guns from her cliff-like sides had been seen; she had apparently

struck, but, somehow, no one had taken possession of her, and she had drifted outside the new British line. There were wrathful groans on the fore-castle of the *Hirondelle* as the monster drifted behind the friendly screen of her sister ships, and the biggest prize of the victory was lost. The great Spaniard, however, was only reserved for a more cruel fate eight years later, on the memorable day of Trafalgar.

The Spaniards might now have renewed the fight. They were still twenty-three ships to fifteen; and of the fifteen, one, at least, the *Captain*, was a wreck. But there was a discouraging air of alertness and of fighting energy in the British ships, and the nerve of the Spanish admiral failed him. There was a flutter of signal flags at his peak, and then the great Spaniards, one after another, stood away on the star-board tack, and were soon a fringe of vanishing top-sails on the skyline; and Jervis, gathering up his prizes and his damaged ships, sailed for Lagos Bay.

He had not taken many prizes, perhaps, but he had won a memorable victory, and one attended with greater political results than many victories of more resounding name.

CHAPTER XV

“LA MULETTE”

“Coastwise—cross-seas—round the world and back again,
Whither flaw shall lead us or the Trades drive down:
Plain-sail—storm-sail—lay your board and tack again—
And all to bring a cargo up to London Town.”

—KIPLING.

THE days that followed were, for Gaunt, a time of busy but unexciting service. After a great sea-fight, such as that off Cape St. Vincent, a smart brig like the *Hirondelle* had a score of urgent sea-errands to run, and Gaunt, determined that the brig should create a reputation for herself, showed an energy and activity which his admiral's shrewd eyes noted, but on which his iron lips wasted no cheap words of praise. He rewarded Gaunt by piling on him ever new tasks.

One afternoon late in March the *Hirondelle* ran in with despatches to Lisbon, where Jervis—he was not Earl St. Vincent till July—was lying, repairing damages, and waiting for reinforcements from England. A packet had just arrived, with mails from London; letters had reached the brig, and Gaunt glanced with envious eyes at the figure of young Litton, absorbed in reading what were plainly

home letters. The touch of Irene's hand was on the sheets the lad was reading; a breath of her presence seemed to exhale like a perfume from them.

"Good news, I hope, Litton," Gaunt said at last.

The lad's face wore a look of quite unusual gravity as he looked up.

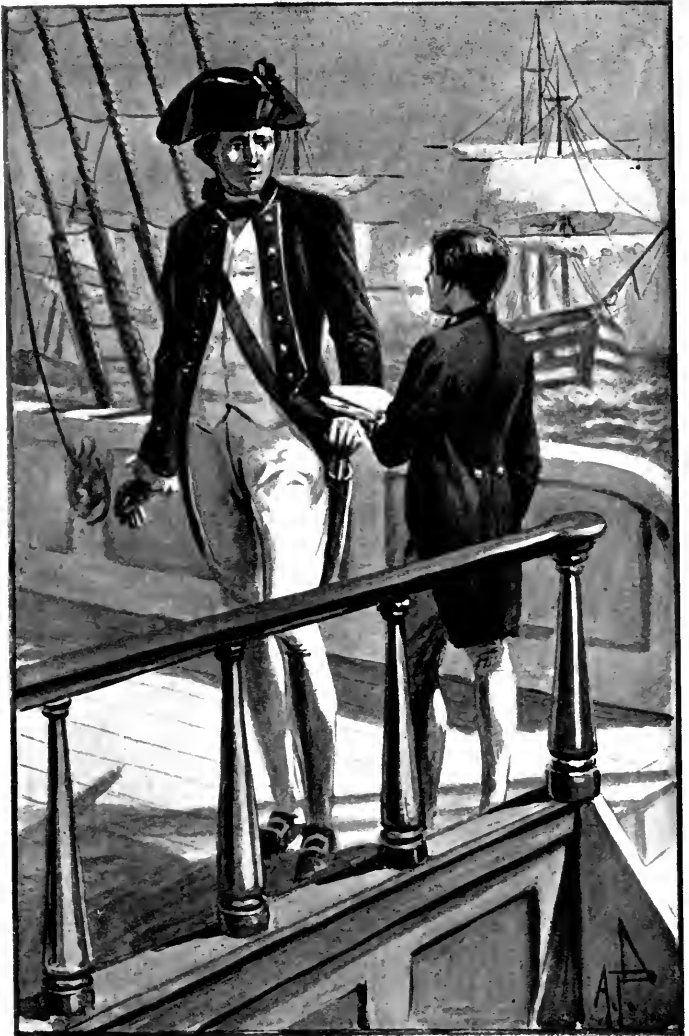
"Well, sir," he replied, "the governor's off to the West Indies; and he is taking Rene with him."

"What!" exclaimed Gaunt.

"Yes! Something big has gone wrong with the business at Kingston, and the pater has to go, and he takes Rene with him; and Uncle 'Insects' too. They sail in the *Cardiff Castle*, under convoy. But everybody knows what 'convoy' means; and with so many French privateers in those waters," Litton continued discontentedly, "he oughtn't to take Rene there. Don't you think so, sir?" he added, looking up to his commander's face with a gleam of sly humour.

Gaunt's look startled him. His face had gone suddenly white with concern and anxiety. It was not merely that Irene, in the West Indies, seemed much more remote from him than in Guernsey. Gaunt knew enough of the sea and its risks to be sure that the voyage meant peril. A sense of danger—a feeling which was an instinct, a premonition—crept into his very blood.

The dainty figure of the girl he loved always seemed, to his imagination, framed in spring blossoms, with the song of the lark flowing about it, or the rich harmonies of organ music. And now he



“WHAT!” EXCLAIMED GAUNT

had to suddenly picture her, set in rough sea-surroundings, waking and sleeping under the shadow of peril—peril of storm, of fire, of wreck, and—deadliest risk of all!—of the swoop of some hungry privateer. Any such perils threatening himself would have been contemplated with the coolest indifference. They were as commonplace as sea-biscuit; part of the day's work. But that they should threaten Irene—and he not there to guard her—was quite another thing! Indeed, these were dangers because he was not there to watch against them! Such alarms does love breed even in a light-hearted and gallant sailor! He loses temporarily, and, as far as the object of his affections is concerned, half his senses, and nearly all his courage!

“But have they sailed?” asked Gaunt.

While Litton was consulting his letters, Fraser came up, and reported that the brig's number was flying from the admiral's peak, and the talk with Litton was broken off abruptly.

Gaunt found he was summoned on board the flagship, and was absent some hours. He returned to the brig towards evening; and, as he sprang on the deck, Litton saw that Gaunt's face wore the look of a man on whom fortune has suddenly thrust some great and unexpected boon.

“Litton,” he said, as he clapped the lad's shoulder energetically, “we are off to the West Indies, too; and we will look after the *Cardiff Castle!*”

Jervis had been in a mood of unusual amiability during Gaunt's interview with him. Reinforcements

from England were actually coming up the Tagus; he was about to hoist his flag in the *Ville de Paris*, one of the most formidable ships afloat, and with twenty-one line-of-battle ships under his flag, sail for Cadiz to seal up the Spanish fleet there. Off Cadiz, indeed, though he knew it not, Jervis was to maintain another of the great blockades of history, a blockade stretching through two stormy years, and memorable for closeness and vigilance.

"Gaunt," said Jervis presently, "you played a smart trick on that scamp Captain Giron before, when you captured the *Hirondelle*; but, as you know, he got away from *L'Aurore*."

Yes; Gaunt had heard the story on his return to the fleet from a run to Lisbon. A boat had been left carelessly towing, in the dusk of the evening, astern of *L'Aurore*, and Captain Giron, with characteristic quickness and decision, had seized the chance it offered. He had evaded the notice of the sentinel, and, with a comrade, had silently let himself down from the stern of the prison-ship, cast off the boat's painter, and drifted away in the darkness. No doubt he had reached the shore safely. It was the case of a chance opportunity, seized with infinite courage and adroitness.

The escape made some noise, and brought the officer in charge of the watch on board *L'Aurore* to grief, but by this time was almost forgotten. The unforgetting Jervis, however, it was clear, still kept it in angry recollection, and the news, brought by

his secret agents, that Captain Giron was once more afloat, stirred the British admiral to action.

“ Yes,” Jervis continued, “ he is hard to get and hard to hold. Now I’m going to put you on his track again. It’s a pretty duel betwixt you two. He scored first, you next, and the third time is lucky. Giron is a scamp, but he is as good a seaman as they’ve got, and he has run out of Cadiz, and is off westward to Martinique or Guadeloupe. My information is that he carries important despatches to the French islands, and then he is to cruise in those waters for prizes. He has a smart and powerful craft under him, a three-masted corvette, *La Mulette*, and he will cut up the sugar ships there badly. I want to intercept those despatches, and to stop *La Mulette* from harrying the West Indian trade. And I want to put an end to Master Giron. He got away from the prison-ship very cleverly, and I feel sore about it. He is too clever to be let loose in those seas, and I will send you on his track.”

Gaunt was shrewd enough to see that Jervis did not choose him for the task out of mere good nature. It was a stroke of sardonic humour to send Gaunt once more in pursuit of his enemy. And Jervis, who understood men and took a somewhat cynical view of human nature, knew that personal feeling in this case, as in the re-capture of the *Hirondelle*, would make pursuit keen and tireless.

As for Gaunt, the knowledge that he was offered a bit of work which would take him into the same latitudes as Irene, and make the business of watch-

ing over her part of his duty, sent such a flush of delight into his face that Jervis stopped and looked at him curiously. Here was some new and unknown force entering as an element into the case! But plainly it was one which made the task only the more delightful to Gaunt, and would increase his eagerness to run down *La Mulette*; and Jervis, too busy to follow a clue so capricious, allowed it to pass.

"Don't carry your masts away, Gaunt," he said drily, as he ended the interview; "but catch *La Mulette*. Put your hands on that corvette and on the Frenchman."

Gaunt, however, was prepared to risk more than his masts in order to get into the neighbourhood of the *Cardiff Castle* before *La Mulette* began her predatory cruise in West Indian waters.

Twenty-four hours afterwards, the *Hirondelle*, a leaning pillar of white canvas, was flying before a fresh south-east breeze on her course towards the West Indies. Gaunt felt, with an exhilaration that thrilled in every drop of his blood, that fate was kind to him. He had under his feet what every man in its crew, at least, regarded as the swiftest craft afloat; and he was bound on an errand which appealed at once to his love and his pride. He had to pit his wits once more against those of Captain Giron; and the stake at issue might well prove to be the safety and liberty of the girl he loved.

The south-east breeze hardened to a gale, which sang with ever deeper note, and at last hooted, in

the brig's canvas. A great sea was running; the pursuing waves grew in scale and menace. But still the hard-driven brig flew on. Gaunt, in such a sea, would, under ordinary conditions, have lain-to; but now he drove on, under topsails and jib, with everything else close-reefed. The guns were housed; the decks were awash; the bows of the gallant little craft were now flung wildly up to the blowing skies by some great wave; now they were buried under the green sea, that leaped at her and broke, a cataract of rushing foam, over her head. The fretted sea-line swinging at the horizon, the wilderness of the raging sea, the howling gale under the clear, hard sky, the spray blowing up to the foremast head, like smoke, all made up a wild scene.

The floor of the tossing sea was empty. Once they sighted a great line-of-battle ship, her topmasts struck, her jib-boom gone. The only canvas she showed consisted of three lower topsails, with reefs. She could be seen only when both vessels were on the top of a wave together. The wild rolling of the great ship—its missing jib-boom giving it the air of a prize-fighter with a broken nose—added to the wildness of the scene. Gaunt through his glass could see that the pumps of the great ship were at work, and jets of clear water were running from the scuppers. But the black hull with its stumpy masts drifted beyond the skyline, leaving the sea empty again.

On the 31st the *Hirondelle* ran into Kingston, and Gaunt delivered his despatches. Two days followed, days of fretful impatience and of un-

reasoning alarm on the part of Gaunt, and then the convoy came lumbering into port; but amongst its swarm of sea-battered ships there was no *Cardiff Castle*!

She had parted company, Gaunt learned, in a gale, just before the convoy entered the Windward Passage. This was not, in itself, an alarming—or even unusual—circumstance. A convoy hurried—not to say, harried—the heavy merchant ships under its protection, across the sea, as an ill-broken sheep-dog might harry a flock, with loud barking of guns and much flurrying of its helpless charge. It was quite a familiar experience for half the ships under convoy to trickle out and lag behind, at the risk of being snapped up by privateers, which, like lean and hungry sea-wolves, hung on the flanks and rear of the straggling, slow-moving fleet.

Gaunt, however, was deeply concerned, and set himself to pick up every item of information about the missing ship. He searched the log-book of every ship in the convoy. The gossip of all the gunrooms was eagerly listened to and sifted.

He learned that a suspicious-looking corvette had been seen to windward of the convoy when within two days' sail of the entrance to the Windward Passage. So suspicious was the look of the strange sail that the *Uranus* had been detached in pursuit. The corvette, however, had the heels of the frigate, and ran out of sight. It was not seen again; but, two nights later, the *Cardiff Castle* had disappeared. She was always a laggard; she had lost her foretop-

mast in heavy weather, and she offered a tempting bait to any prowling Frenchman.

When Gaunt had gathered every item of news the gossip of the convoy or of the other merchant ships yielded, he went to his cabin and set himself resolutely to think out the problem. He was torn with anxiety, but kept a cool brain. The presence of real and definite peril sobered his imagination. He was a practical seaman again, and not a lover with hag-ridden nerves.

He had no doubt that the corvette discovered hanging on to the convoy was *La Mulette*. Captain Giron was carrying despatches; but he was a privateersman by nature. The predatory instinct was in his very blood. The lumbering, far-stretching convoy, with its tail of lagging merchantmen, like so many fat and broken-winged birds, would be an irresistible temptation to him. He had plainly hung to windward of the convoy, on the chance of catching any straggler, and the *Cardiff Castle*, it could hardly be doubted, had fallen into his hands.

Gaunt felt that this was the worst stroke of ill-fortune that had yet befallen him. It blackened his life once more. The most precious thing the world held for him was in the hands of the one man who burned against him with a flame of malignant hate. And that one man was Captain Giron, without either pity or scruple!

Gaunt paid the penalty of a realising imagination. He had only to shut his eyes, and the whole incident

rose in clearest vision before him. He saw all the stages of the drama in swift succession. The Frenchman had stolen, with lights hidden, through the darkness, down on the doomed ship. He saw the corvette, handled with perfect seamanship, sliding, ghost-like, on to the quarter of the sluggish merchantman. Then came the leap of the boarders, the clash of weapons, the shouts of the combatants, the sudden change in the captured ship's course, the disappearance of her lights—he realised it all. And then he pictured the waking of the girl he loved, to find the French in possession of the ship.

With a sudden tightening of his heart, a rush of angry blood to his head, he imagined Captain Giron's audacious eyes wandering over Irene's face and figure, and he not there to stand betwixt the two. The sweat broke out thick and hot on his forehead, and his fingers closed convulsively, as though on the handle of a cutlass, while, on the canvas of his imagination, that scene was painted as if in lines of fire.

In those wild days a French privateersman was divided, too often, by very thin partitions indeed from a mere pirate. In the case of Captain Giron especially, when his lawless eyes fell on a face so tempting and beautiful as that of Irene, Gaunt could easily imagine that the partition betwixt privateersman and pirate would instantly vanish. And if he only guessed Gaunt's relations with Irene, to all other lawless passions would be added the fierce

stimulus of hate. And that the suspicious, keen-witted Frenchman would, somehow, learn his enemy's interest in the beautiful English girl within his power, Gaunt felt quite sure! Here was a situation to alarm an anxious-minded lover; a lover who was not a philosopher with frozen blood, but an ardent sailor!

CHAPTER XVI

IN CHASE OF THE CORVETTE

“Oh, which were best, to roam or rest?
The land’s lap or the water’s breast?”

—BROWNING.

BUT love had not robbed Gaunt of all his sanity. He pulled himself together with the reflection that he had no energy to waste in idle imaginations, or equally idle anger. The business before him was to guess his enemy’s plans and settle how to meet them. He had the gift of putting himself in the place of his antagonist, and thinking out the problem—so to speak—with his opponent’s brain.

Giron, he knew, was bound for Martinique; would he take his prize with him? That was hardly probable. To convoy the slow and leewardly merchantman past the coast of Hayti and the long stretch of the Lesser Antilles—the hunting-ground of a dozen British men-of-war—would be too perilous. It would need both daring seamanship and good luck to carry the swift-footed *La Mulette* herself into Port Royal. Gaunt decided that the Frenchman would send his prize eastward to some French port—Bordeaux or Nantes—while he himself carried his despatches to their destination.

Here, then, were, for Gaunt, two diverging points of search and attack. *La Mulette* was, no doubt, running in a wide curve past Porto Rico and the Leeward Islands to Martinique. But the *Cardiff Castle*, with her bowsprit turned eastward, was almost certainly creeping back to Europe in charge of a prize crew; and she carried Irene and her father as prisoners! The *Hirondelle* had but to run through the Windward Passage to get on her track, and Gaunt felt sure that, quartering like some swift hound along the course his quarry must take, he could run the heavy-bottomed *Cardiff Castle* down before she reached French waters.

He rose to his feet and paced restlessly to and fro, as he mentally pictured the *Hirondelle* bearing down on to the captured ship's quarter. He could imagine himself leaping, at the head of the boarders, on her deck. So keen and ardent was his fancy that he could see the lifted face of Irene, the soft flash in her unfathomable eyes, as they met, in the surprise and gladness of deliverance. Then he thought of the reluctant gratitude of Sir John as he found he owed his rescue to the sailor he had dismissed so brusquely. Even "Uncle Insects" would, under such conditions, forgive him for wearing a blue jacket and wielding a cutlass!

Here was a prospect to tempt a lover who was also a sailor! But, then, Gaunt remembered he was a man under orders. He belonged to England, not to himself. His first and peremptory business was to carry out his instructions and intercept the

Frenchman. If the captured merchantman, ploughing her way eastward, represented Inclination, the corvette, beating up for Martinique, represented Duty; and Gaunt had been trained, in a noble school, to count duty as supreme. So, in the forum of his conscience, that ancient and perennial conflict which emerges in every man's life, and in such diverse shapes—the conflict betwixt desire and conscience—had to be fought out afresh.

Gaunt fought his battle; and when the bewildering tangle of human motives perplexed him, and the face of her he loved seemed to draw him from duty with a spell too strong, he knelt down in his cabin like a brave and simple-minded sailor, and prayed. Presently he rose. The distress of mind had not gone; it was to lie upon him for many a day. It might even never leave him! It might well be that his choice would cost him the woman he loved. But clearness of purpose had come to him. He must do his duty; and he must do it first of all. And, having reached that decision, he permitted himself no further debate about it.

He had reported himself to the admiral on the station; but, as he was detailed by Sir John Jervis himself for special service, he was left free to act on his own judgment. The moments were worth more than gold, and Gaunt lost none of them. Life and death—or issues more urgent than either—might turn on the loss or gain of an hour; and by dawn the next day the *Hirondelle* was running under every inch of canvas on an E.S.E. course for

Martinique. *La Mulette*, as Gaunt calculated, was traversing the outer curve, while the *Hirondelle* was running along the radius, of a great semi-circle, and the meeting-point of the two lines was Martinique.

Gaunt, secretly, had no doubt that he would be in time to intercept the Frenchman. It was not merely that the course of the *Hirondelle* was shorter than that of the *La Mulette*. The very gloom that lay on Gaunt's mind, the sense of sacrifice, and the distress—not to say anguish—that sacrifice brought with it, made him sure of intercepting the Frenchman. He had abandoned the woman he loved; Fate itself—that already wore such a face of cruelty—would hardly be so pitiless as to bid him miss the enemy he sought.

For Gaunt the days that followed were very black. He felt he was leaving behind him all the sweetness of his life. He had resolution enough to turn his back on even his love, at the voice of duty; but he had not philosophy enough to smile under the process. Duty, in spite of the moralists, is not always sweet; nor does loyalty to it always bring, at the very moment of sacrifice, a compensatory glow of ecstatic feeling. If it did, duty would lose its great office as the test and discipline of character.

Certainly Gaunt trod his quarter-deck with very dark brows during the days the *Hirondelle* was flying east to meet his enemy, instead of north, in pursuit of his love.

Was he a faithful lover? At times he metaphori-

cally trampled on himself for what wore the aspect of a cold-blooded desertion of the girl he loved at the moment she needed him most. He had never heard of Lovelace's immortal couplet—

"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more,"

and therefore could not soothe himself with its music. But he was acting in its spirit. He was putting conscience before inclination. And yet the strain of that fine choice left him haunted with anxiety, fretful, impatient. And, if the commander of a man-of-war wears a brow of gloom, the eclipse of it darkens the whole ship. For the first time, the officers and men found their commander could be unreasonable. He took good service without a smile, and scourged loitering or imperfect service with a whip of bitter speech. The cheerful life of the whole brig, in some way which no one could quite explain, was chilled.

Peters, after undergoing a public and gloomy rebuke for the state of his guns, demanded of Johnson, with a growl of disgust, in the privacy of their berth, "What the — had come over the skipper?" an inquiry to which the wise Scotchman only replied by a strictly non-committal shake of his head. Litton confided to his brother-mid. the theory that "the skipper" was "just a little bit off his head," but would come right soon. Litton, perhaps, felt the change most, for Gaunt was his ideal and hero. Gaunt certainly touched the boy's

life, unconsciously, with many fine influences. His seamanship and daring created a professional ideal for the lad. His frank-hearted and unashamed piety challenged his conscience. But all these happy forces temporarily vanished in the gloom of Gaunt's changed mood.

Litton found some compensation in the society of Johnson, the big boatswain's-mate. An odd but strong affection linked the two—so unlike in appearance—together, and made them chums. The sea-wisdom of the big north-countryman, his shrewd humour, his cool daring, his yarns of shipwreck and of fight, were, for Litton, an endless fascination. While in Johnson, the gay, bright, impertinent young midly kindled an admiring and protecting affection very pretty—if also somewhat amusing—to see.

On the fifth day after leaving Kingston the *Hirondelle* ran through the passage betwixt Dominica and Martinique, Cape St. Anne being in sight to starboard. When clear of the passage, Gaunt bore up and took a northerly course, under easy sail. He was on the line by which he was sure *La Mulette* would come, and any hour might show her topsails above the horizon. He might overshoot his mark if he was too eager.

Yet, after all, Gaunt nearly missed his foe. On the second day, with a fresh wind blowing from the north-east, the look-out hailed the deck, and reported a sail to leeward; presently a second sail was visible. Gaunt's face, for the first time since the *Hirondelle* left Kingston, grew almost cheerful

as he watched the two sails in sight. He promptly wore, and ran before the wind, to head off the leading ship. It was clearly a case of flight and pursuit, and the ship being chased, it was assumed, must, from that very fact, be a Frenchman! There was a touch of unconscious race-arrogance in that logic; but it was logic which was characteristic of the British seaman of the day. Facts, indeed, usually agreed with it!

The ships were travelling on intersecting lines, and as they neared, Gaunt found he had read the problem truly! It was a corvette, French in every detail of rig and build, and there could be no other craft of that kind in these waters except *La Mulette*. He had caught his man! The vessel in pursuit was plainly an English brig of war. The Frenchman was bigger, and carried heavier guns than her pursuer; but it apparently did not suit Captain Giron to fight a desperate battle with an armed ship—a contest from which he was sure to emerge half-destroyed, even if victorious. His business was to reach Martinique safely, and deliver his despatches; and with characteristic cleverness and audacity he had kept close inshore, and was slipping safely past the British cruisers, on their beat further out to sea.

The brig of war, however, had caught sight of the corvette, and instantly spread every inch of canvas in pursuit. But the corvette was a traveller, and all the chances were in her favour until the *Hirondelle* appeared on the scene. This changed the situa-

tion. If she could head the Frenchman off, Captain Giron would be compelled either to run ashore or to fight.

Gaunt handled his brig with cool and perfect skill. He laid the course of the *Hirondelle* for Point du Diable, a horn-like projection which juts out from the northern extremity of Martinique. If *La Mulette* weathered that point she might escape but it soon became clear that the *Hirondelle* was too fast and too well handled to give the corvette that chance. Captain Giron had, no doubt, long ere this recognised his old ship, and would have closed with her savagely, as the corvette carried heavier guns and many more men than the brig, and to have recaptured his lost vessel would have been for the Frenchman, a stroke of supreme good fortune. It would have soothed his vanity and restored his credit. But the unknown pursuer was coming up fast astern; to be caught betwixt the fire of both brigs would be fatal, and *La Mulette* suddenly tacked and ran in under the cape. The fox was at least run to earth!

Gaunt wore the *Hirondelle*, and bore up to meet the brig of war. While she was yet a couple of miles distant, a cluster of black specks ran up to the head of her mainmast, and broke into flags: she was talking to her new consort. Gaunt found that the pursuing craft was the *Hawk*, an 18-gun brig, and its commander was his senior. The two brigs closed fast: the *Hawk*, a handsome and formidable craft, rounded to; the *Hirondelle* dropped her

quarter-boat into the water, and Gaunt was soon shaking hands with his brother commander on the new brig's quarter-deck.

"Thank you for heading off the chase," said Captain Hall heartily. "Your brig is a beauty. She has the legs of the Frenchman, and yet he is a traveller. I am afraid the *Hawk* would have lost sight of him if you had not turned up. What craft is it?"

"I fancy I know her," said Gaunt; "indeed, I am in these waters specially to look after her," and he explained the errand on which Sir John Jervis had sent him.

"Well," said the captain of the *Hawk*, "you've hit her cleverly enough, and we must make a dash at her in the boats. She's lying under a battery, and it will be a tough business to bring her out. But the job has got to be done."

The captain of the *Hawk* was plainly a business-like man. He was stout, florid, voluble, and a little bit inclined to patronise Gaunt, who was his junior by ten years; but he was a sufficiently gallant sailor, eagerly bent on the task in hand.

The two captains sat down in the *Hawk's* cabin to lay their plans. Captain Hall had his plan ready; he proposed that the ships should look in at the Frenchman, and then, as if the plan of a boat attack was counted too desperate, and had been abandoned, the *Hawk* should sail off, as though going back to her station, leaving the *Hirondelle* in the offing.

The Frenchman, Captain Hall argued, would conclude that the *Hirondelle* was simply keeping watch over him, and that the other brig-of-war had abandoned the task; and so the boat attack would come as a surprise. At eleven o'clock the *Hirondelle* was to show a light seaward, the *Hawk* would run back directly night fell, and rejoin her consort, and the two ships would send in their boats. Captain Hall was confident the plan would succeed, and *La Mulette* be taken by surprise.

But Gaunt doubted. He knew his enemy! "Captain Giron," he said, "is too keen-witted to be caught napping, and by a device so simple. But," he added, "we must make a dash at him, and that plan may do as well as any other. It's a case of plain fighting. My orders are clear, and it would be a calamity to let a craft like *La Mulette* loose in these waters."

All details as to the force to be sent, and who was to lead, were settled. Then Gaunt went back to his ship. The two brigs ran down, within easy distance of each other, to Point du Diable, and rounded it till they opened on the corvette. She was lying at anchor, close under the land. A gun from the cliff above her flashed, and a ball came skipping across the sea towards the leading English brig. The deep sound told that the piece was of heavy metal. At the flash of the gun the two brigs bore up and stood out from under the land.

When they had run into the offing, the *Hawk* dipped her flag, as if in farewell, and bore up north,

her tall pile of canvas dwindling till it was a mere speck on the skyline. Then it vanished, and, while the setting sun poured its crimson splendours over the floor of the sea, the *Hirondelle* stood on, about five or six miles off the coast, under easy sail.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BOAT ATTACK

“Offshore, where sea and skyline blend,
In rain, the daylight dies ;
The sullen, shouldering swells attend
Night and our sacrifice.
Adown the stricken capes no flare—
No mark on spit or bar,
Girdled and desperate we dare
The blindfold game of war.”

—*The Destroyers.*

EVENING came, and darkness fell on the sea—the swift-coming darkness of a tropical night. The stars crept out; the wind blew softly; peace seemed to brood over the hidden waters. But on the *Hirondelle* the scene hardly suggested peace. A boat attack was an incident which aroused the keenest interest, and the brig throbbed with the hum of warlike preparation.

The attack was to be in great strength, and six boats, carrying 110 men, were to take part in it; the *Hirondelle* was to contribute 50 men, the *Hawk* 60, and Gaunt himself was to lead. The entire crew of the *Hirondelle* volunteered for the service, but Gaunt chose his men himself with keen discrimination. He had temporarily recovered his cheerfulness by this

time; the light had come back to his eyes, the frankness to his brow, and he did the work pleasantly.

"Next time, my lad," he said, again and again, as he bade some eager seaman stand back. "There will be plenty of fun for you all in turn. We can't take all the best men on the brig away, you know."

But this reflection hardly consoled those who were rejected. They wore the looks of men to whom fortune had shown herself strangely unkind.

Some of the crew, meanwhile, were busy muffling the oars of the boats; others were sharpening cutlasses, or sewing the band of white on the left arm of their jackets. Others were getting the boat magazines ready. And through all this grim preparation ran a curious thread of cheerful merriment. For the night attack, with its crowded perils, was, for these hardy tars, an adventure which lifted them out of the commonplace. It stirred their imagination and kindled the fighting impulse in their blood.

Every detail of the coming attack was arranged with minutest care. Directly the boarders gained the deck of the Frenchman, Johnson, selected for his height and fighting qualities, was to force his way to the wheel and stand by. Half-a-dozen light-footed topmen were to race up the Frenchman's ratlines and cast the topsails loose. Peters, the gunner's mate, with a comrade, was to make his way forward and cut the cable.

Fraser's disgust on finding he was not to go with the boats was deep.

"If I didn't go," Gaunt explained, "the first lieu-

tenant of the *Hawk* would take command; so you wouldn't get it in any case; and the business is too serious to be exposed to any risks."

Gaunt arranged that the boats of the *Hawk* were to board forward, while those of the *Hirondelle* made a dash at the Frenchman's quarters. Captain Giron, Gaunt calculated, would hold the poop, and while he remained active the corvette would hardly be carried.

At eleven o'clock three lights, as arranged, were shown seaward, over the *Hirondelle's* quarter, and a little after midnight the sails of the *Hawk* were dimly visible, a pile of shadow in the gloom. As she rounded to, her boats fell smartly but silently into the water, and pushed off like so many sliding black patches on the face of the sea. Captain Hall came up in his gig to see the boats start, and exchange last words with Gaunt.

The officers in command of the boats came on board the *Hirondelle*, and, with the officers in charge of the *Hirondelle's* boats, gathered in Gaunt's cabin for their final instructions. Gaunt patiently explained every detail to the eagerly listening group.

"I shall lead, in the *Hirondelle's* longboat," he said. "I have studied the position in which the corvette lies, and think I can hit her safely enough. Our first risk is that the boats may get separated in the darkness, and we'll pass a line from boat to boat."

Captain Hall was plainly itching to go with the expedition, and was full of eager suggestions and anxious counsel, to all of which Gaunt listened in

silence. His plan was clear to his own mind, and to its least detail. He would not vary it, and he had the true leader's gift of making his ideas vivid and convincing to those who had to carry them out. He gave his final instructions in the fewest possible words.

"We may surprise the Frenchman," he said, "but I doubt it. Surprise or not, however, we'll make a try for her. Captain Giron is a scamp of the first water; but he is as crafty as a fox and as fierce as a wolf. Make no mistake, gentlemen, we have a tough job on hand to-night."

A low laugh, with a thread of glee in it, ran through the group of gallant young fellows who were to lead.

"Yes," said Gaunt, interpreting that sudden whisper of laughter in the darkness, "yes, you'll push the attack home, I don't doubt, and the men will do their part. But we need coolness as well as dash. Keep your heads! And God be with us all. To your boats, gentlemen; but remember: Silence!"

The *Hirondelle's* boats by this time had taken their places, and the little convoy pushed off silently on its daring errand. Johnson, who commanded the *Hirondelle's* gig, told his men, in a growl, to "swallow their tobacco juice; for if they spat it out the Frenchmen might hear."

In the black skies the stars shone like points of fire. The boats were mere shapeless and sliding blotches, patches of black on the black surface of the sea, strung together like so many beads on a string. But Gaunt noted with disquiet that at each

touch of the oars a gleam of phosphorescent light ran out on the velvet-like blackness of the water. The boats, from the cliff, if the French were on the look-out, must seem like some monstrous and long-drawn-out form of life, with shining antennæ, crawling on the face of the water. And that the Frenchmen were on the keenest look-out, Gaunt never doubted for a moment. He did not make the mistake of under-rating the foe!

There was nothing for it, however, but to push on, and take all risks. Action was, for Gaunt himself, after the gnawing disquiet of the last six days, a most blessed nepenthe.

It was a long pull before the black shape of the land which formed the extremity of Point du Diable showed dimly through the gloom. The soft wash of the waves breaking on the shore was presently audible; then a bird called from the dim foliage—its note floating softly on the darkness—as the boats crept noiselessly round the point. The sound of some animal breaking its way through the bushes was presently heard. “We shall have the ebb coming out,” Gaunt said to himself, as he noted the swing of the tide.

The boats still crept on, till Gaunt at last caught sight of the Frenchman’s topmast, showing like a black, slender pencil in the gloom against the grey-ness of the cliff. Presently, low down, almost at the water level, a patch of faint and ghostly haze, as from imperfectly hidden lights, became visible. Gaunt ordered his men, in a whisper, to lie on their oars;

the other boats stole up, the line which held them together was thrown off.

"The Frenchman," Gaunt said in suppressed tones—for he knew sound would run along the water—"has hidden his lights; but that haze shows where she lies. The corvette will be moored broadside to the sea, and when we make a dash she'll show lights enough. Pull softly till you hear my whistle; then go in as fast as you like."

The boats, by this time, were abreast of each other; the faint rattle of the oars as they got into motion again was apparently heard; a shrill, high-pitched voice hailed in French out of the darkness; the next instant a flare blazed out ahead, and lit up the tall masts of the corvette. A score of battle lanterns gleamed, and from stem to stern the Frenchman was alight.

Gaunt's whistle, on the first sound of the Frenchman's hail, had rung out clear and shrill; the line connecting the boats had already been cast off; and, as though obeying a single impulse, the six boats leaped forward. It was a race for the Frenchman, and the seamen put their whole strength into the pull. The officers' voices, crisp and sharp, could be heard in admonitions of various sorts.

"Now, lads," one entreating voice cried, "don't let the *Hawk's* barge be last."

"Pull, you beggars, pull!" shouted a youthful voice—plainly that of a too eager midddy.

"Don't keep the Frenchman waiting, boys," Johnson remonstrated, from another boat. It was

a gallant struggle betwixt the crews which should first bump against the Frenchman's side.

Suddenly the whole broadside of the corvette flashed, stabbing the darkness with points of flame, and filling sea and sky with its roar; but the grape flew high, and not a boat was touched. The battery above was silent; it could not fire without risk of hitting the corvette. Gaunt, peering keenly ahead, saw that the boarding netting was triced up high along the whole length of the corvette. Captain Giron had not been caught napping!

A few breathless seconds more, the boats dashed up, the oars swung loose, the men grasped their cutlasses, and at half-a-dozen points the British were eagerly clambering up the black sides of the corvette. The first lieutenant of the *Hawk* was swearing loudly at his men to let him lead. He sprang up, putting his foot on the shoulder of a stooping seaman; but the moment his face appeared above the Frenchman's bulwark he was shot through the head, and fell back dead.

Captain Giron's arrangements were skilful in the highest degree. A line of seamen knelt, with loaded muskets, below the level of the bulwarks; and, when the boarders clambered up and hung on to the netting, trying to hew, or tear, their way through it, they were clearly visible, and the French shot fast and surely. A line of darting flames played among the netting, and each point of flame meant an English life.

The British seamen clung stubbornly to their task.

Again and yet again they swarmed up. When they could not break their way through they shot back through the netting, or thrust furiously with their pikes. One little cluster of seamen battered open a port in the corvette's side, and tried to fight their desperate way in. But in a little more than ten minutes every third man in the attacking party had been killed or wounded, and the attack had failed.

Thrice Gaunt climbed up to the netting on the corvette's quarter; but each time he was thrust or knocked down. He made a fourth attempt; and, clinging with one hand to a shroud, hewed fiercely at the tough, elastic, yielding net, a mere slender film, yet almost as unpierceable as steel, which formed the corvette's defence. He had at last cut a gap in it, and Captain Giron, at that moment, ran up, cutlass in hand, to stop the Englishmen from streaming through. The light shone on Gaunt's face, and with a deep-throated "Sacre!" the Frenchman recognised him, and sprang at him. Steel grated on steel in fiercest cut and guard; but Gaunt, who was half-kneeling on the edge of the bulwark, was at a disadvantage. Suddenly his follower, a fine, active seaman, leaned forward and thrust fiercely with his pike, and Captain Giron went down.

The gap was clear; but a cluster of Frenchmen, by this time, were running aft, answering their captain's shout, and before he leaped on the deck Gaunt looked coolly round. The attack had failed. The boats were drifting away on the returning tide, in the darkness, filled with the dead and wounded.

Gaunt hesitated a moment—one passionate and bitter moment—and then leaped back into his boat.

“Pull off, men,” he said quietly. He knew the point where wise daring ended and suicidal rashness began.

A couple of oars splashed in the water, and the longboat crept slowly off, full of wounded men. The other boats had drifted, by this time, into the friendly shelter of the darkness, followed by the jeers of the triumphant French, and a splutter of musketry. A sailor in Gaunt’s boat shook his fist at the French ship.

“Blast you!” he said. “You have cost some good men’s lives.”

Gaunt had no time for regrets or expletives. He had the wounded and dying to think of, and their suffering lay heavy upon him.

“Pull ahead, men,” he said. “Let’s get to the brig, and put these poor fellows into the doctor’s hands,” and he busied himself in care of the wounded.

He overtook the other boats presently, and at his whistle they closed round him. Gaunt stood up in the stern-sheets of his boat, and questioned each, as it came up, as to the condition of its crew. His voice rang cool and clear through the darkness.

“Lads,” he said at last, “you fought gallantly; no men could have done more. It’s the Frenchman’s turn to-night, but our turn will come! Now for the brig, for the sake of the wounded.”

That quiet voice, with its steady note, acted like

a tonic on the survivors of the crew of each boat, and a half-cheer rose in the gloom. That faint and wavering thread of sound sent a stab of pity through Gaunt's heart. Its feebleness measured the losses the boats had sustained.

Slowly the boats crept back towards the brigs, with their sad freight of wounded and dying men, the black shadow of defeat lying on them. Suddenly, while they crept on their melancholy way, there stole through the darkness a faint, far-off, lamenting sound; a thread of song, a song that was a dirge. A thrill ran along Gaunt's nerves as he listened. Did that sound, like the distant blowing of an elfin horn, come from sea or air? Did it fall out of the sky? Was some spirit bewailing the brave men gone?

While he wondered, a sailor near him growled prosaically—

"Yon's Aberdeen Jock."

Then Gaunt recognised the sound. A Scottish sailor lay dying in the leading boat; he was the favourite singer in the larboard watch of the *Hiron-delle*, the delight, indeed, of the forecastle. As he lay dying he was singing "Lochaber no more"—that saddest of Scottish songs:

"Farewell to Lochaber, farewell to my Jean,
Where heartsome wi' thee I hae mony days been;
For Lochaber no more, Lochaber no more;
We'll maybe return to Lochaber no more."

The distance softened the sound; the darkness filled it with an infinite pathos; the vibrating sea

gave it range. It crept over the waters with a curious clearness. The dying man was back in spirit among the glens of his childhood; he heard the lament of the pipes. But human sentiment takes diverse and contradictory shapes. While Gaunt listened and thrilled to the pathos of the moment and of the song, a rough, impatient voice from the next boat suddenly cried—

“Oh, stop that — wailing! We are deep enough in the dumps already!”

The boats, meanwhile, pulled slowly on through the darkness, and at last the brigs were sighted. They were lying with topsails back, the *Hawk* being the nearer of the two ships. A voice hailed sharply from her quarter-deck.

“Hullo there! The *Hawks*! Is that Lieutenant Glenn?”

Gaunt made no reply till the boats were under the brig’s quarter, and that silence itself told the story of the defeat.

“We have failed, Captain Hall,” he said, “but your lads did splendidly. Lieutenant Glenn, I am sorry to say, is down. You had better drop a whip from the mainyard, for there are many poor fellows wounded.”

A murmur of concern ran round the English brig, and Gaunt heard the call of the officer and the bustle of hurrying feet as a whip was being rigged from the mainyard to hoist in the wounded.

Gaunt, meanwhile, with his own boats, pulled on to the *Hirondelle*, and for half-an-hour was busy

with his dead and wounded. His look was clear and his voice calm. Defeat seemed to sit with strange lightness on him. His brow had less of gloom on it than it had worn for a week. He offered no explanation of the failure, and no comments on it. He was taking the issue of the adventure with a coolness which not merely astonished and puzzled Fraser; it chilled him. Who could have imagined that the commander of the *Hirondelle* would have accepted failure—and failure of so bloody a sort—with a philosophy so complete and unashamed!

Fraser's brow grew angrily perplexed as he reflected on it. Litton, too, with a boy's impish quickness, noted the strange mood of his commanding officer.

"The skipper must be off his head a bit, after all," he said to himself; though he would have punched his fellow-middy's head if he had offered a suggestion so treasonable!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COUNTERSTROKE

“Men of England, Heirs of Glory,
Heroes of unwritten story;
Nurslings of one mighty mother,
Hopes of her and one another.”

—SHELLEY.

SHALL I hoist the boats on board, sir?” asked Fraser, when the wounded had all been seen to.

“No, Fraser. Let them lie there. Send aft all the men who did not go in the boats.”

The whistle of the boatswain’s mate rang shrilly along the deck; the men quickly gathered, and stood with a look of expectancy on their faces in the dim light of a lantern in the rigging.

Gaunt looked down on the mass of upturned countenances for a few moments in silence. The gloom, the hush, the silent figure of their captain, come back to them from a desperate expedition, the sense of something strange about to happen, curiously affected the crowd of seamen. An electrical thrill—coming whence, or why, no man could tell—ran through them. Then Gaunt began, in quiet and steady tones—

“Men,” he said, “we have failed. The lads did

their best. Better no men could have done. But the Frenchmen were ready for us, and had the best of us, and we've brought back fewer men than we took in."

There was a movement in the crowd; their feet shuffled restlessly; an angry murmur began to rise. Gaunt stilled it with a gesture. "But now," he went on, after a dramatic pause, "I'm going to finish the job, and fetch that Frenchman out;" and the grim purpose in Gaunt's voice sent a fresh thrill through the listening sailors. "The first party had their try, and they were beaten off. But, lads! we have given that Frenchman a shaking! They have many men down. We left their boarding netting in rags. They will be off their guard. The last thing they will dream of is a second attack; and that is the very thing we'll give them! I'm going back to finish the job. It shan't be said that any Frenchman short of a frigate beat off the lads of the *Hirondelle*. The blood of your mates," he went on, with a drop in his voice, "is on that corvette's bulwarks. It will cure the poor fellows' wounds when we bring her out as a prize. Who will come with me?" he cried suddenly, raising his voice till it ran along the decks like a trumpet.

There was a hush of breathless silence.

"I'll go," cried Litton, and his shrill, boyish voice cut like a knife through the darkness. It seemed to send an electric wave along the nerves of the men. Fraser had listened with astonishment to Gaunt's appeal.

“I’ll take the men in, sir,” he said; “you’ve been in once. It’s my turn now, and the lads will follow right enough.”

A growl was running through the men. They moved uneasily. Some voice must speak for them. An old salt at last found speech—

“Of course we’ll go, sir,” he cried; “we’ll make the Frenchmen pay——” Here his words were drowned in a sudden tumult of voices, fierceness—assenting fierceness—in every cadence of them.

“You take us in, sir,” shouted a big topman; “we’ll do the job.”

“I’ll go, Fraser,” said Gaunt to his lieutenant; “but you may come too. The job will need us both. We’ll leave the master’s mate in charge. Arm the men, and tell off the crews. Three boats will be sufficient to carry all the men we can take, and that are fit to go. We’ll start in twenty minutes; but I’m bound to go off to the *Hawk* first, and give them the chance to join. If they won’t come, we’ll do it ourselves, if we have to take every sound man in the *Hirondelle*.”

Gaunt left the deck of his own vessel in a stern, hushed fever of preparation, in which now was no gay note of merriment, and was quickly on the deck of the other brig.

“Captain Hall,” he said, “this is a bad business;” a statement to which his brother captain responded with an angry groan. “But it will be a better one before we have done with it. I am for going in again!”

Captain Hall stared.

"That's plucky," he said, "but hardly sane. If we failed at first, when we had the advantage of a surprise, and the men were fresh, and we took in our full strength, how can we hope to succeed when we've lost so heavily? I've lost my first, poor Glenn; as good a man as ever stepped; and out of sixty men, nearly one-half are down. It will be a bad tale to tell the admiral," and the captain of the *Hawk* gave a melancholy and exasperated sigh.

Gaunt listened unmoved. He went on to explain his plan and his reasons for it, with a cool, persistent steadiness which seemed to almost mesmerise his brother captain.

"I know the French fighting gifts," he said. "They have been badly hit as well as ourselves. There will be a reaction amongst them after the fight. The crew will have gone to pieces, and they can never dream that we'll attack again within the hour."

He did not add that he had seen Captain Giron go down, and believed that circumstance gave them their best chance of success.

"No, Gaunt," said Captain Hall at last, as he walked impatiently to and fro in his cabin, "I must not throw away any more men. I'm the senior; but your orders from Sir John leave me no authority, or I'd forbid the attempt to be made. Not but that I think it very gallant of you! You've a touch beyond me, by Jove."

The second lieutenant of the *Hawk*, a fine young

fellow, with bandaged head, who had commanded one of the boats in the first attack just ended, here broke in —

“I think Captain Gaunt is right, sir,” he said; “and, anyway, it would never do for the *Hawks* to hang back while the lads from the other brig go in.”

“Do you think I don’t know that!” exclaimed Captain Hall irritably. “You young fellows have no responsibility; but I must not throw away the men. It’s nothing short of murder.”

“Let me call for volunteers, and take a boat in with Captain Gaunt,” urged the second lieutenant.

“‘Call for volunteers’!” cried Captain Hall, with a raised voice and a gesture of angry impatience. “Of course, the men will all want to go. ‘Volunteers’! Do you think I wouldn’t like to go myself!” and he turned away, swearing under his breath.

“I know the old man,” said the lieutenant confidentially, as he walked with Gaunt to the brig’s side, “and I think you may reckon on a boat. The men would be past holding to-morrow morning if your fellows did the trick, and we were left out. There would be nothing short of a mutiny,” he added with a laugh.

Gaunt pushed off for the *Hirondelle*. The boats were already manned and waiting for him, but he found there were four boats in the water, instead of three, as he had directed.

“How is this?” he asked.

“Well,” said Fraser, with an embarrassed laugh, “it’s almost a case of mutiny. When the men who

came back found they were to be left out of the second business, they were pretty near pitching into the new crews, and old Johnson launched the quarter-boat, and got into it without orders; and there he is with half the starboard watch."

Gaunt judged it wise to take no notice; and the fourth boat fell unrebuked into its place. Gaunt found Litton beside him in the stern-sheets of his own boat.

"Yes, lad," he said simply, "I meant you to come." Then he put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Geoff," he said, "this is going to be a rough business, and we can't tell who'll come back from it. Your mother taught you to pray. Don't forget the lesson now."

Just then two boats from the *Hawk* pulled up, and the second lieutenant reported them to Gaunt.

"This is better than I had hoped," said Gaunt, grasping the hand of the gallant young fellow, as the boats floated side by side. "Who is in command of the other boat?" he added, peering through the darkness. The answer was so indistinct that he could not catch it.

There was no time to waste; the moments were flying; the dawn would soon come, and Gaunt gave the signal to move.

"Now, lads, follow me," he said briefly.

Silently the boats pushed on through the darkness. Owing to some change of temperature, or of wind, no phosphorescent gleam ran out this time from the touch of the oars. The temper of the men

was grim; no whispered jests passed betwixt them as they bent to the oars. They had a bloody defeat to avenge, and no breath to waste.

When they rounded the headland the corvette, in vague, shadowy outline, could be just discerned. A few dim lights shone on her deck; but, apparently, no attempt to repair injuries had been made. The boarding netting, as the boats crept nearer, could be seen hanging raggedly from the rigging. Captain Giron, Gaunt reflected, must be very badly hit!

“We’ll all board together midships,” he whispered, as the boats, for a moment, drew together.

He would not, as in the first attempt, lessen the weight of his stroke by distributing it over several points. His plan this time was to throw his men, in overwhelming strength, at one point, and so break through the corvette’s defence. As in the first attack, men had been detailed to cut the cable, loose the topsails, get command of the wheel, &c., the moment the British had gained the Frenchman’s deck.

“Now, lads,” whispered Gaunt, and at the whisper the boats shot forward. There was no striving to get the lead this time, but the men bent to their oars with a dogged and silent purpose more menacing than a storm of cheers could have been.

There was a shout of alarm from the Frenchman at last, which told that the boats were seen; a tumult of high-pitched voices broke on the night air, a jangle of hurried and contradictory orders. But the boats, pulling in fierce silence, had reached the corvette, the men were swarming up her side,

the boarding netting was torn or hewed into shreds. There was a wild rush of the startled French, a brief check, a sway of contending bodies, the swift gleam of steel striking on steel, the red, quick flash of pistols. Then the boarders broke fiercely through. The topmen were racing up the rigging; Johnson was hewing his way aft towards the wheel, towering high above the crowd.

For some wild minutes the struggle was furious and uncertain. But the British were bigger and stronger men; they were in the mood to avenge the first failure, and nothing could check them. The Frenchmen were driven back across the deck to the opposite bulwark; many were cut down, resisting fiercely. Others fled aft or forward. Peters had already reached the head of the corvette, and was hewing at the cable; Johnson stood erect at the helm; Gaunt heard the flap of the unloosed topsails above him. Just then Peters, with a flourish of his hand, signalled the cable was cut; Gaunt felt the corvette move under his feet. He waved to Johnson to let her head fall off, and the sound of soft ripples told that the Frenchman was moving. The ship was won!

The battery now began to flash wrathfully from the cliff; but the captured ship moved steadily out seaward unhurt, while the British seamen shook hands in glee with each other. The oldest of them had never seen a fight so fierce, so short, so triumphant. Here was failure turned into success as by a stroke of magic.

“Boys,” cried Johnson exultantly to the boarders, “what about the *Hirondelles* now? We came in once too often for the Frenchman; and twice in one night beats the record!”

“Don’t forget the *Hawks*,” said Gaunt, who caught the big north-countryman’s voice. “*Hawks* and *Hirondelles* may be proud of each other.”

“Yes,” said Peters, as their commander passed on, “but we’ll do the crowing for our own roost!”

The sky was grey with the coming dawn as Point du Diable was rounded, and the lights of the two brigs could be seen faint and far-off in the offing.

As Gaunt passed along the deck, busily engaged in restoring order and looking after his wounded and prisoners, he found a British officer sitting on the breech of a gun, trying to bind up a gash on his arm. He peered closer, in the uncertain light, to see who it was.

“Why, Captain Hall!” he cried in astonishment.

“Yes,” said the commander of the *Hawk*, with a half-ashamed look, “I had the second boat. You didn’t think I could let you go, and stay in my cabin, did you? I couldn’t have looked the *Hawks* in the face if I had done that. The very ship’s boys would have jeered at me. It’s all — foolishness, you know, but,” he added, getting up, “it’s plucky foolishness—it’s splendid foolishness! And, Gaunt, I’m proud of you. You’ve a stroke beyond my art. And we’ve got the Frenchman too, after all, though we’ve paid a pretty price for her. But the sight of the corvette will do my poor wounded

fellows more good than all the surgeon's sticking-plaster."

The two commanders stood talking together for a few minutes, while the light of the coming day grew clearer about them. Then Gaunt heard a sudden cry that somehow—he knew not why—ran through him like a flame. He turned. At the break of the companion stood Litton, and a girl's figure, with arms thrown round his neck, embracing him.

Something in the slender grace of that figure, something in the curve of the bent head, the piled mass of rich hair, made Gaunt's heart stand still. The next moment the red, astonished face of Sir John Litton was visible. His dress was disordered, his hat was thrust back on his head, he stared round the deck with a look of questioning amazement and of half-doubting gladness. While Gaunt still looked, with astonished eyes, there followed the moon-shaped glasses, the gaunt cheeks, the long, lean body of "Uncle Insects." Was all Guernsey on board?

Gaunt hurried forward a few steps, and then stopped. The girl lifted her face; yes, it was Irene! For a moment Gaunt saw nothing but her face. His eyes were eagerly reading the features which for so many months had haunted his dreams. The girl's face had grown thinner; the deep, bewildering eyes seemed larger; the sensitive lips were quivering. There were lines on the cheeks. The girl of peaceful hawthorn lanes and blossoming

orchards had vanished; but a woman—graver, stronger, and yet more enchantingly beautiful—had taken her place. Irene put her hand on her bosom, as though to steady the beating of her heart; with the other she put back a straying tress of hair from her forehead.

Gaunt could still do nothing but stare at that bewildering vision; till at last Irene looked up half-shyly, but with an exquisite smile.

“Captain Gaunt,” she said, “you didn’t expect to see us here?”

Gaunt, even in the bewilderment of his thoughts, noted with new wonder the absence of wonder in her face and speech. She, at least, was not taken by surprise at the meeting. Then the girl’s eyes dwelt upon him. He was a somewhat startling spectacle. The frown of battle was yet on his brow, his face was black with powder, and drawn in lines of weariness. His jacket was torn; he had lost his hat, and had hastily bound a handkerchief round his head. A red line of blood—crimson on black—crept from beneath the handkerchief.

As Irene looked, a wave of pitying concern swept through her, and Gaunt saw a light, as of tender anxiety, break, like a soft fire, in her eyes. At that shy and sudden flame his imagination warned itself for many a day.

Gaunt by this time had grasped the meaning of what he saw. Captain Giron had brought Sir John and his daughter with him as prisoners on board the corvette, instead of sending them with the *Cardiff*

Castle back to France. Then—so quick is thought!—he found time to shudder at the reflection of what would have happened if he had not intercepted *La Mulette*, and headed her off in the chase! He might have captured the merchantman; he would have lost the one shining prize of his life—the girl he loved!

He thought, too, with an emotion of quite unsailor-like distress, of how the two brigs had fired into the ship—a mere wooden shell—that held that dainty figure! Sir John was by this time talking volubly; Gaunt heard his voice as if in a dream. He found Sir John was, in a hesitating fashion, saying what a debt he and his daughter owed to Gaunt. He stopped in his somewhat formal speech, and looked round. The black scars of battle on every side of him, the sight of the British sailors, many of them with blood-stained bandages, and of the bodies of the slain, lying side by side under the bulwark, broke through all reserve.

"Yes, Commander Gaunt," he said, grasping his hand afresh, "your brave fellows have done splendidly. They've done honour to the flag, and they've saved us from a French prison."

He went on to explain. "We were sent below when you chased us yesterday. At night Captain Giron said he was sure you would send in your boats, and we were all confined below. We heard the boat attack, and it sounded as if hell had been let loose," said Sir John, with shuddering emphasis, and turning redder than ever at the recollection.

“Uncle Insects,” meanwhile, was staring round with shocked and reproving eyes.

“This is a sad sight,” he said; “a sad sight. And so unnecessary!”

“So ‘unnecessary’?” asked Sir John.

“Yes. I had been remonstrating with the French captain—though my French is somewhat defective, and he would not talk English with me. And I think I was making an impression on him. I am sure he felt the force of my arguments, and I intended to pursue the subject with him. I think he was an open-minded man. But this hasty action on your part, Commander Gaunt, has spoiled it all,” and “Uncle Insects” glared at Gaunt with much severity.

“Inskip,” said Sir John, with great energy, “you’re a simpleton! You may understand a beetle when you see it; but Captain Giron is a reptile quite beyond your science.”

The scientist, however, went on quite unmoved: “My poor friend, Dr. Sagesse, too, is killed, and I had almost convinced him that he was hopelessly wrong in his theory as to the relation of the ambulacral system of the echinodermata to the skeleton.”

It seemed open to doubt whether “Uncle Insects’” grief was a tribute to the friend he had lost, or the dialectical triumph which was left incomplete.

“A very decent fellow,” he continued, “but hopelessly wrong at many points. He would have it that the Hyalonemadæ are true actinozoa,” said “Uncle Insects,” in tones in which an archbishop might

announce a new and damnable heresy. "His views on the functions of the Malpighian tubes in the Diptera," he added, "were nothing less than deplorable—truly deplorable. He was very obstinate, but I think I was convincing him when this unhappy incident occurred;" and "Uncle Insects" looked round, with almost tearful eyes, on the deck of the corvette, scribbled over with characters of strife.

"Where is Captain Giron?" he asked.

Gaunt had noted with surprise that his masterful voice had not been heard during the fray: that the fight came to an end so soon was proof enough that he was not an actor in it. Inquiry showed that a boat had come off from the battery directly the first boat attack had been repulsed, and Captain Giron, severely wounded, had been carried ashore, and his despatches had gone with him. Gaunt's victory was thus, after all, incomplete. He had captured *La Mulette*, but Captain Giron and his despatches had slipped through his fingers.

Captain Hall now came up, and was introduced, and Gaunt drew aside with Irene, leaving Sir John talking to the commander of the *Hawk*. Irene was still holding her brother's hands, and her eyes were wet with tears, as well as shining with gladness, as she lifted them to Gaunt's. He was puzzled by her want of astonishment at what seemed to him the most astonishing of meetings. They parted in a green lane in Guernsey, full of the perfume of the hawthorn; they met on the blood-stained deck of a captured Frenchman, off Martinique.

"Did you expect to see us, Miss Litton?" Gaunt felt compelled to ask.

"Oh," she said, "the Frenchmen knew the *Hirondelle* when she was sighted yesterday, and I saw you last night in the first attack of the boats. I saw your face"—here speech failed her for a moment, and she grew pale at the memory—"I looked through the porthole of my cabin, and saw your figure as you climbed up the side of the corvette. A flash of light fell on your face, and I knew it; but oh! Captain Gaunt, it was so stern and fierce! It frightened me! Then I saw you fall back into the boat, and a sailor, with blood running red from a wound, fell with you."

The girl spoke with quivering lips, and her face went suddenly white as she recalled the scene; and Gaunt, without exactly knowing why, felt an unreasonable gladness at the tokens of concern written on her face.

Sir John, meanwhile, was talking with Captain Hall, and he glanced now and again uneasily at the group near the companion-way.

"Your ship," he said at last, "is the bigger of the two?"

"Yes! The *Hawk*, I should think, is fifty tons bigger than the *Hirondelle*, though she doesn't carry a heavier battery."

"And are you Commander Gaunt's senior?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose you are in command?"

"No, Gaunt is under special orders from Sir John

Jervis, and," added Captain Hall, somehow guessing what was in Sir John Litton's mind, "the whole credit of this business is his. He headed the Frenchman off in the chase; he led in the first attack; and the second attempt, which succeeded, was purely his own idea. It was a touch beyond me; I was clean against it."

"But you took part in the attack, Captain Hall?"

"Yes; there's so much of the middy in my blood still. Indeed, I could not have faced the men on my own ship if I hadn't," he added with a laugh. "But, Sir John, you owe it to Gaunt that you are not still Captain Giron's prisoners. And he was not a very pleasant fellow, was he?"

"No," said Sir John, with a wry face, "he certainly was not."

Gaunt was asking that very question of Irene, at the same moment; and the girl's expressive face, without the aid of words, was a sufficient answer.

"He was hateful," she said, and then her lips shut so significantly that Gaunt knew there was a painful story behind. His eyes were a pair of fiery interrogation points as he looked at Irene, and she went on reluctantly, answering the angry question in Gaunt's eyes.

"He did me the honour," she said, "of being too attentive;" and then would say no more.

By this time the brigs were reached, and as the corvette, with the boats towing behind her, moved slowly up, the crews of both vessels jumped into the rigging and cheered frantically.

Here and there a sailor, wounded in the first attack, with bandaged head or arm in sling, leaned on the bulwark to watch, with delighted eyes, the prize come up. The Frenchman was taken, after all! Here was a better medicine for their wounds than any the doctor could prescribe.

CHAPTER XIX

IRENE AND THE FRENCHMAN

“ Far ran the naked moon across
The houseless ocean’s heaving field ;
Or flying shone, the silver boss
Of her own halo’s dusky shield.”

—TENNYSON.

A NATURAL instinct of maidenly self-respect made Irène hide Captain Giron’s conduct behind that vague phrase “He did me the honour of being too attentive;” but, as a matter of fact, during the fortnight she had spent on *La Mulette* Irène had endured a succession of alarms and of humiliations that might well have written deep lines on her girlish brow.

La Mulette, exactly as Gaunt had surmised, had picked out from the convoy, as her prize, the deep-bodied *Cardiff Castle*, with topmasts gone, lagging like a broken-winged bird behind the scattered swarm of transports, and had swooped down on her in the dark hours before daybreak. The wind was light, and Captain Giron was able to steal up on the unsuspecting merchantman’s quarter, and fling on board the grapnels, almost before his approach was discovered. Then came the leap of the boarders,

and with one hot rush, and almost without a stroke of resistance, the *Cardiff Castle* was taken. The Frenchmen, though the surprise left the unfortunate merchantman without a chance of resistance, were cruel, and the second mate, in charge, and half the watch, were cut down. The cabin doors and the hatch of the forecastle were secured, the lights were extinguished, and the corvette and her prize ran off before the wind to the north-east.

Captain Giron was a smart seaman, quick of eye and full of resource; he sent his carpenters, with a strong crew, on board the prize; the damaged topmast was repaired with magic speed, and by dawn the two ships were out of sight of the convoy, and, for the moment, safe from recapture. It was altogether a very neat example of the privateersman's art. At noon the passengers were ordered on deck. The corvette was running, under easy sail, on the quarter of the *Cardiff Castle*, and Captain Giron was mustering the passengers on his prize before sending her, in charge of a strong prize crew, back to France.

He walked along the line of passengers, scanning them with mocking eyes, for he was not the man to abate his own triumph out of regard for the feelings of an enemy. He had noted Sir John Litton's name in the ship's papers, and knew him to be a man of wealth and importance, out of whom some profit might be extracted. Irene stood by her father's side; next her was the tall figure of "Uncle Insects," gazing with puzzled eyes, through his huge spectacles, at the scene.

Captain Giron paused involuntarily as he came opposite the English girl. His bold eyes ran over her face and figure, and his slanting eyebrows went up with a touch of amazement. Here was the fairest face on which even his roving and audacious eyes had ever dwelt. The maidenly figure, too, was of exquisite charm. Captain Giron's mind worked quickly. So dainty a morsel was not to be allowed to slip out of his strong and masterful hands too easily.

"Sir John," he said, in laborious English, "I send the prize back; but it is well that I take you with us to Port Royal. The governor may want to treat for your exchange. The ship's officers I take too."

Irene clung to her father's arm; the bold face of the Frenchman, with its cap-like mass of close-cut hair, black as ebony, its upward-tilted eyebrows, and audacious eyes, chilled her—she hardly knew why. But Captain Giron had moved on with a half-ironical bow. A French officer came up, and Sir John had only time to select some of his luggage, and, with his daughter, was peremptorily handed into the boat, and carried to *La Mulette*. "Uncle Insects" insisted, with bellicose energy, on accompanying his niece, and when the relationship was understood he was allowed to step into the boat with her.

"That French captain," he confided soothingly to Irene, "looks a reasonable man. I have hopes that I can persuade him to act on civilised principles and become a man of peace."

Irene, inexperienced girl though she was, thought



"IRENE CLUNG TO HER FATHER'S ARM"

that Captain Giron looked singularly unpromising material out of which to construct "a man of peace," in her uncle's sense.

The officers of the captured ship, on reaching the privateer, were sent forward, but fairly comfortable cabins were assigned to Irene and her father and uncle, and the two ships parted company, the corvette holding her course past the Antilles, towards Martinique.

In the evening Sir John and his daughter, with Mr. Inskip, were told that Captain Giron expected them to dine with him. Sir John thought it politic to accept the invitation for himself and his brother-in-law, but Irene begged to be excused, pleading that she was unwell. Captain Giron accepted her excuse with an impatience that he did not pretend to conceal; and Sir John, though half choked with anger at what he mentally described "the French scoundrel's insolence," found it prudent to pass over the incident. As for "Uncle Insects," he had found in the French doctor an entomologist as ardent as himself, and he temporarily forgot everything else in the joy of that discovery. The two eager scientists sat by the hour together discussing in broken French and equally fragmentary English their beloved insects, and the discussions betwixt them not seldom rose to a very unscientific temperature.

At lunch the next day the steward brought another invitation from Captain Giron, and Irene felt it was wise to accept it. Captain Giron was loud-voiced and over-attentive, and poor Irene found the

meal to be a distress. At dinner in the evening the French captain drank freely. His talk was incessant, now in French, now in somewhat elementary English. Irene sat beside him, and his eyes dwelt on her with a gloating persistency which disquieted her, and she fled at the earliest moment to her cabin.

She ventured on deck, late next morning, in company with her father. The officer in charge, the first lieutenant, was a tall man of melancholy aspect, with a face which for length, ruefulness, and a certain non-humorous simplicity, suggested that of Don Quixote. He came up and exchanged a few words; and with a girl's quickness Irene felt that Lieutenant Angot was a gentleman, and of quite another type to his domineering captain. The noise and disorder of the corvette amazed even Irene's untrained senses. Sir John, who walked to and fro by her side, sniffed in scorn at all he saw.

"This is worse than the *Cardiff Castle*," he said, "and she was only a merchant ship."

Presently Captain Giron made his appearance, and his fierce personality, and the scowl on his black brows, sent a hush along the noisy deck. The French captain plainly held his chattering crew with a strong hand, and secured the results of discipline if he was careless of its methods. His curt, stern orders were obeyed with lightning-like despatch. He came up presently to Sir John and Irene, and talked with them. Irene felt half fascinated with the fire of his masterful eyes. She was conscious of

the power of the man, yet loathed the heavy face and the audacious stare.

Captain Giron, on his part, listened to Sir John's courageous excursions into the French language with a grinning politeness, which flattered that worthy merchant. It was at least a compliment to the quality of his French! But Irene felt that the Frenchman's eyes were incessantly returning to her face, and wandering over her figure, with a meaning that sent the blood to her cheeks; and glancing across the deck, she caught the melancholy eyes of Lieutenant Angot fixed on her with a half-ironic pity that both stung and disquieted her.

The days crept by, and Irene found herself pursued by attentions from Captain Giron, through which ran a flavour of insolence that tried both her courage and her temper. She had no defence but her own quick wit and girlish tact; for Sir John was not observant. He was occupied, too, in fretting wrathfully over the interruption of his voyage to Kingston, and in meditating on the injury to his business on both sides of the sea which his captivity must occasion. As for "Uncle Insects," he had practically disappeared from human knowledge. He was wandering in company with his brother savant, the French doctor, in an entrancing world of entomological controversies.

Irene, moreover—partly out of shy self-respect, and partly from dread of an open quarrel—made no complaint to her father. But the situation was rapidly becoming intolerable.

One evening after dinner Irene threw a lace mantilla over her hair, and leaving the gentlemen at the table, went on deck. The wind was soft, the sea quiet. The clear moonlight and the warm, whispering air drew her to the bulwarks. She leaned on them pensively, dreaming of home; and sometimes into her shy and maidenly imagination crept, she hardly knew whence, or why, Gaunt's face. The quarter-deck was empty except for the man at the wheel; the officer was leaning on the rail forward.

Presently Captain Giron came on deck alone; Sir John had gone to his cabin. He saw the figure of the English girl leaning over the bulwark; an evil light shone in his eyes, and he walked with eager steps to her.

"Ah! Miss Litton," he said, in his nasal French, "what a night for lovers! What a moonlight to kiss in!"

Irene drew herself hurriedly up.

"I prefer not to discuss that, Captain Giron. I must go below."

"No! no!" said Captain Giron audaciously; "stop a little, Miss Litton. Has a face so beautiful as yours been kissed by nothing better than moonshine? *Ma foi!* English lovers must lack both taste and courage," and he laughed cynically.

Irene made no reply, but moved away with erect head and a quick step. Captain Giron kept by her side, chattering gaily. Irene hurried on; as she stepped into the lighted cabin it was empty.

"*Ma belle,*" said Captain Giron thickly, and put

his hand on her shoulder. The girl turned quickly, and broke away from his touch.

“Captain Giron,” she said, “you are rude!”

She stood in the full light of the lamp, and its radiance fell on her white face and flashing eyes. A low, evil laugh broke from the Frenchman, and his eyes ran deliberately over the girl’s face and figure; and for the first time in her life poor Irene felt she had endured a look which shamed her, and which a pure girl must resent.

“Rude to you? Bah! you are beautiful, and I am a Frenchman, *voilà tout!* Is it ‘rude’ to admire? *Ma chère,*” he whispered, “be kind!” and he put out his hand audaciously, as though to draw her to him.

Poor Irene! She was helpless on an enemy’s ship; and such an enemy! Where was her father, or her uncle? Strange fires of anger would have shone through even that sage’s philosophic spectacles could he have seen the pair at that moment!

But the thrill of fear which ran through the girl’s blood for a moment passed. She had the courage of her race. She lifted her face and looked with cool and steady scorn at the Frenchman. The purity, the high courage of her look, for a moment daunted him. Then she walked with unhurrying step past him, and, though he cursed himself for his cowardice, he dared not put out his hand as she passed. But when Irene reached her cabin she fell on her knees, and in a rush of shame and fear, and with a passion of sobs, cried to God for help.

"Oh, mother! mother!" she whispered.

What might be the power of the fierce and reckless seaman she could not guess, nor how much he might dare. She and her father and her uncle were his prisoners. If she told Sir John what had happened, his honest English rage would break out; and there was that in Captain Giron's face which assured Irene it would be ill with her father if he came to an open quarrel with the Frenchman. For a moment she thought of the first lieutenant. At least he was a gentleman! But what could he do to restrain his overbearing captain? The horizon was black for Irene; and she was but a helpless girl. Then her thoughts turned, somehow, to Gaunt. There was a sense of safety in the mere recollection of him, with his look of command! She pictured his clear, stern face looking on that of Captain Giron. It was Hyperion to a satyr!

As she sat meditating, her memory was subtly stirred by some law of association, and it suddenly dawned upon her that the overbearing captain of *La Mulette* was the Frenchman who had recaptured the prize from Gaunt, and from whom Gaunt in turn, had taken the *Hirondelle*! A hundred correspondences proved it. There was, she knew, a fierce and unsparing duel betwixt the two men; and if Captain Giron caught a hint of her relationship to Gaunt, Irene felt, with an unreasoning but absolute certainty, that this would bring affairs to a crisis. A darker motive still—that of mere hate—would make the lawless passion of the Frenchman yet more

daring. She must conceal all knowledge of Gaunt; and, for the sake of peace and for her father's safety, she must make no complaint. When was a softly-nurtured English maiden in a more cruel position!

That night, at dinner, Captain Giron was louder-voiced than usual. He looked at Irene with a half-mocking smile. She had made no complaint to her father; and this was proof of a fear which, the Frenchman imagined, put her in his power. But while he stared at her, with this thought running through his evil imagination, Irene lifted her face and met his glance with a clear and steady courage through which glowed a certain fire of scorn. This slender English girl, the Frenchman admitted to himself, with a certain grudging and astonished admiration, had a high spirit. How he would enjoy bending to his will a face so fair and a spirit so proud!

His talk ran on his own exploits, and they were told with a gay arrogance which even Irene, spite of herself, found amusing. And some of them were worth telling. This boasting Frenchman had some reason for his boasts. His lieutenant, "knight of the rueful countenance" though he was, had a touch of higher breeding than his captain, and some of the stories evidently made him uneasy.

Then, by some ill-fortune, Captain Giron began to tell the tale of the loss of "the best brig that ever floated," and her recapture, and Gaunt's name crept into the story. Sir John pricked up his ears at the sound.

"I know Commander Gaunt," he said, "and I have heard that story from him"—then he stopped and frowned; for he remembered that Captain Giron's part in it was scarcely to the credit of his honour. The Frenchman, however, had no prickings of shame.

"It was clever," he cried; "I tricked *ces bêtes Anglais*. And you know the English fool? You know Lieutenant Gaunt?" he cried suddenly, turning to Sir John. "Ah! that is the one Englishman I hate. It is a duel *à la mort* betwixt us. He took by a trick my beautiful brig, the *Hiron-delle*, from me once more. And *you* know Lieutenant Gaunt, mademoiselle?" he cried, turning to Irene.

Something in her face caught his eye; he glanced from father to daughter with malign quickness. He saw, as with a flash, the whole story. Irene's downcast eyelids, Sir John's look of stiff anger were too expressive.

"Ah!" he said mockingly, "mademoiselle is interested in Monsieur Gaunt."

Then he stopped with a muttered curse, while a gleam of deeper malice kindled in his eyes. Was it possible that he had in his power the girl his enemy loved? With that thought he stretched out his hand with a sudden clutch, as though it held his enemy's heart. Sir John was saying, with much dignity, that Commander Gaunt was nothing to them. But the Frenchman's eyes dwelt meditatively and hungrily on Irene's face. An evil meaning

shone so plainly in his look that even Sir John was arrested by it, and flushed with anger.

"Captain Giron," he spluttered, half rising, "I will not allow you to insult my daughter!"

The Frenchman turned slowly and looked at him.

"I don't allow my prisoners to threaten me," he said icily. "I shall send you forward with the other prisoners, if I please. Miss Litton," he added with a vile laugh, "may remain aft."

Lieutenant Angot had risen, but offered no remark. He followed his captain to the quarter-deck.

"Mon capitaine," he said quietly, "Mademoiselle Litton must not be molested. She is a lady, and she is our prisoner."

Captain Giron stared at him wide-eyed, too astonished, for a moment, to be angry.

"You are amusing, mon lieutenant," he said, as he lit a cigar. "I shall entertain myself with Mademoiselle as I please; and, I hope, without incurring your displeasure."

"No," said Lieutenant Angot steadily. "No!"

"And why not? They are aristocrats, and you, mon lieutenant, are you an aristocrat too?"

"Ah, no!" cried the lieutenant. "I am a Frenchman!" And with a certain swagger, but in a gallant fashion, he added, "And so are we all on *La Mulette*. We do not fight with women, and we do not molest prisoners. And there are enough in the ship of my mind to make mademoiselle sacred."

Captain Giron stared at his melancholy-visaged officer with angry wonder. He felt as if a rabbit

had suddenly turned warlike, and was proposing combat. Yet there was a look on that long, gaunt, and rueful visage which somehow cooled Captain Giron.

"Mademoiselle is safe enough," he said, with an execration, as he turned away.

Irene certainly did not feel "safe enough." That hinted threat against her father, and the darker hint of evil to herself, filled her with terror. Where could she find help? Then she fell on her knees in prayer, and the sense, the certainty, of help came almost with the act. Oh! strange, sure source of courage for the fearful; and of strength for the frail; the meeting-point betwixt human weakness and almighty power! As the lonely, menaced girl knelt she felt as if a divine protection shut round her. It was not merely that "some strong-siding champion," such as Milton feigned, an abstraction called "chastity," came to her assistance. It was a divine Father, personal and almighty. She rose from that act of prayer conscious that she could face Captain Giron with a courage as high as his own, and with a nobler root to it.

Captain Giron, meanwhile, sat in his cabin, gnawing his lips with mingled anger and gladness. He saw that he could feed fat both his lust and his revenge. He could strike the English foe to the heart, and make this sweet English girl his prey; and he vowed no scruples should stand in his path towards both goals.

But the grey dawn brought with it the gleam-

ing topsails and the eager pursuit of the *Hawk*. By noon the *Hirondelle* was running across *La Mulette's* track, and heading her off from her port. Night brought the attack of the boats. When the next day broke, Captain Giron was a wounded fugitive, his ship was a prize, and Irene was under the English flag. And, with feminine logic—or want of logic—she found a better warrant for safety, somehow, than even its gleaming folds could offer, in the sight of Gaunt's strong face, and the look of his steady eyes!

CHAPTER XX

A SAILOR AND HIS LASS

“ . . . a soft and purple mist
Like a vaporous amethyst,
Or an air-dissolved star
Mingling light and fragrance far
From the curved horizon's bound
To the point of heaven's profound,
Fills the overflowing sky.”

—SHELLEY.

THE captains of the two English brigs of war, meanwhile, had held a brief consultation as to the future. They had met and shared in a great adventure, but now their courses diverged. The *Hawk* must go back to her cruising-ground, and the *Hirondelle* make for Kingston; but the fate of their prize had to be discussed. It was settled that the corvette, with the second lieutenant of the *Hawk* in command, should keep the *Hirondelle* company, and carry the prisoners into Kingston. Sir John found he must accept Gaunt's eager offer of a passage to that port; and, late that afternoon, with courteous dipping of flags, the two brigs parted company.

Gaunt, as he looked round, with the *Hirondelle* once more under way, counted himself the happiest

and luckiest seaman beneath the British flag. He had carried out his admiral's commission and captured the Frenchman. He had rescued the girl he loved from captivity, and from some half-guessed perils a thousand times worse than captivity; and, whatever fate might deny him in the future, it could not cheat him of the joy of her company for the next few days.

As he paced the brig's quarter-deck that night, Gaunt recalled his mental struggle over the question of whether he should follow the *Cardiff Castle*, or try to intercept *La Mulette* off Martinique. It was a conflict, as he now saw it, betwixt love and duty, betwixt inclination and honour.

"Thank God!" he said to himself, with fervour, "I stuck to duty! And," he reflected, "I found happiness there too! Suppose I had made the other choice; had gone in chase of the *Cardiff Castle*, and then have found that when I proved false to duty, by the same act I had lost Irene"—and his sunburnt face blanched at the thought.

Presently Irene came on deck, in company with Litton. The restless midly soon wandered off, and as Gaunt and Irene leaned, side by side, over the taffrail, he told her of the mental struggle through which he had gone.

"You did right," she said softly, "and duty is always best."

She looked up; the moonlight touched, with its clear light, the curve of her brow, the flower-like cheek; it filled with its soft radiance her deep eyes;

and Gaunt felt that he was the most strangely lucky of men, since duty, for him, wore so fair a brow; and honour smiled at him with lips so sweet!

And now came, for Gaunt, some days of mere paradise. Sir John Litton could not pretend to keep the lovers apart. "Uncle Insects" had served himself heir to the unfortunate doctor of *La Mulette*, and was absorbed in the task of rearranging, on better scientific principles, his entomological collection. So the field was clear. For Gaunt himself, Irene's figure—the gleam of her smile, the flutter of her dress, the soft depths of her eyes, the sound of her voice or foot—was a source of perpetual and amazed delight. It transfigured the brig! The sailors guessed, as if by instinct, the state of affairs, and the whole story of the lovers. Here was a drama to delight Jack's seafaring imagination, transacting itself before his very eyes!

The story, as told and discussed in the brig's head, or by the dim light of a lantern in the fore-castle, took amusing forms. The girl's face, her quick smiles, her clear, questioning eyes, captured both watches and all hands. The figurehead of the *Ariadne*, an old salt who had served on board that frigate confessed, almost with a sigh, "might learn a few points from that dainty lass." The Frenchman, the Jacks understood, had carried Irene off, and many fore-castle expletives were expended on his "—— impudence." Thus the night-fight for the corvette became a scene in a drama of the affections. The dramatic rescue of the maiden, accomplished

with pike and cutlass and pistol, tickled Jack's fancy as he looked back on it, and each man felt a paternal interest in the girl he had helped to deliver.

Sir John was obviously the stern father; and the opinion of the forecastle was very decided about him. How Captain Gaunt was to get the better of Sir John—"weather on the old man," the phrase ran—was keenly discussed in every watch. The sterner spirits were in favour of marooning. The device which commanded the warmest approval, however, was one suggested by an old tobacco-chewing salt, who had fought with Rodney at the Battle of the Saints, and was held, on that account, to be an authority on all subjects—ranging from the articles of war and the best way of weathering on a Frenchman, to the state of the captain's affections. The captain of a man-of-war, this sage announced, could legally perform the marriage ceremony, and Captain Gaunt "could marry hisself" in defiance of Sir John!

Irene, for her part delightfully unconscious of the debates which eddied about slender figure and graceful head, was never tired of watching the orderly and disciplined life of the *Hirondelle*. She was familiar with the lumbering galleries and crowded poop of the *Cardiff Castle*, the unwashed decks, the incessant chatter, the unbuttoned disorder of *La Mulette*. But on the *Hirondelle* she saw sea-life at its best: the snow-white decks, the tall, raking masts and spars, every rope running clear to its place, the perfect, curving lines of guns;

the smart seamen, the prompt and silent obedience that went to make up a man-of-war.

She found an anxious joy, too, in watching her brother. That young gentleman delighted to harrow his sister's feelings by daring excursions to the trucks of the brig's masts, or by performances, with his brother middies, on stays and yardarms. It secretly amused her to hear him order the bronzed and hardy seamen about, and to watch the half-humorous obedience they gave him. Gaunt's quiet authority, again, the atmosphere of command that hung about him, his easy mastery over officers and men, caught Irene's imagination. Even Sir John was unconsciously influenced by it. He saw Gaunt in his true element, and realised something of his fine qualities.

Irene loved most to watch the brig, perhaps, as evening fell, and the sea grew mystical with the gathering twilight. The lower and nearer sails whitened with sharper outline on the gloom. But dusk gathered round the tops of the tall masts, and the swelling topsails, dimly seen, suggested full-bosomed maidens. The masts, thus seen, resembled twin sisters, tall and stately, but shadow-like, their faces hidden, moving out to the dim and solitary depths of the sea, where night lay.

The first day or two of the run was, for Gaunt, like some golden dream. The brig's course was a little north of east; the moon was just past its first quarter, and it was a delight to lean, side by side with Irene, on the brig's taffrail, and watch

the moon rise. The mysterious light stole up the skies and crept over the waters. At one point the curve of the skyline, dark with night, was pricked as by a silver spear-point. The silver point widened; it became a pool of light. Then it ran forward, a clear stream of radiance, like a brook bubbling from under ice; from crest to crest of the low waves it ran, till it smote, with a pallid light, the brig's quarter. It made new and strange shadows in her lofty canvas; it edged the topsails with silver. Then, as the bow of the brig rose, flung up by some wave, the soft effulgence would run athwart the deck, and gleam from one black, sleeping gun to another, and touch with silver the boats and booms.

Litton joined them as they leaned on the taffrail of the brig, and, with a boy's half-careless wonder, pointed up to the great arch of starlit sky, such a sky as hangs only over tropical seas. It was no mere "floor, inlaid with patines of bright gold," over which their eyes wandered. That figure, although it is Shakespeare's, was poor. What image would Shakespeare's genius have found had his eyes looked on such a sky as that now stretched above them! In that deep and mighty concave hung and wheeled uncounted suns. There, wide open to their gaze, were measureless kingdoms of space sown with the golden seed of stars.

Each of the little group found characteristic images in the star-clusters. Gaunt declared that he saw golden fleets sailing through depths of space to

some unseen port, and steered by some unseen Hand. Litton picked out bee-swarms of stars, grape-clusters of stars. Irene, in some mood of deeper thought, half-shyly whispered that she saw, burning in the bright skies above her, the street lamps of the city of God, or golden censers swung beneath some vast temple dome.

Presently Litton wandered away, and Gaunt and Irene remained alone. The heights drew them up. Side by side in spirit they seemed to walk in those fields of awful space, and in the light of those mighty suns lifted beyond mortality and change.

Presently Irene's eyes fell.

"Look," she cried, pointing to the sea. It was sown with reflected stars, a myriad glittering seed-points of light. Deep answered to deep, the depths beneath to the depths above. The ship floated between two firmaments. There were stars beneath and stars above; and Gaunt felt that the dainty spirit beside him was worthy to walk on a pavement of stars, or beneath a roof of stars! The starlight glistening in the dark waters seemed to tremble in the deeps of her eyes; her voice fell into the key of the mystical whispering of the sea. A lover is always half a poet; and if he is sea-bred, he fills the whole circle of sky and sea with reflections of the face he loves!

But the sea is the most fickle of elements, and within a few hours Irene was to have an experience of its fiercer moods. She came on deck the next afternoon, and found a new aspect in the water and

the sky. The glass was falling; the wind came with a sighing sound; the deep blue of the tropical sky was blanched into a whitish grey.

Gaunt, a fine seaman, was preparing for the wild weather he knew was coming. He took in all his light canvas, and brought the brig under reefed topsails. Evening drew on dark and hot, and Irene begged to be allowed to remain on deck; and Gaunt, who found it impossible to resist the glance of her petitioning eye, at last consented. A stout chair was lashed under the shelter of the bulwark, and Irene, wrapped in waterproofs, sat and watched the darkening sky, and listened to the lament of the rising wind, and saw the tiny figures of the men on the yards struggling with the flapping canvas, as sail was being reduced.

One short, fierce gust—the prelude of the gale—smote the brig, and Irene heard the wind hum off the mainsail like some loud, aerial bassoon played in the upper chambers of the air. The courses were brailed up, the topsail yards were down on the caps to reef, the canvas was flapping wildly. Irene thrilled, half with excitement and half with dread, as she looked at the swaying yards, with a dozen figures, the reef-points in their hands, standing apparently on mere air. The wild skies, the blowing wind, the brig straining as it swung to the rising sea, deepened the awe of the scene.

But the gust passed. Under the blackening skies a stifling, unbreathing calm lay on the water. The sea seemed to wait, in fear, under the menace of the

skies. The brig was stripped like a gladiator for the arena; and Irene found time to note, with a certain thrill of pride, Gaunt's air of cool and easy command, his mastery of the ship, the steady tones of his voice. If there was to be a duel betwixt man and Nature, the coming peril at least left *his* nerves unshaken. And Irene, with a curious and eager expectancy, sat waiting to hear the first rush of the gale, and to see the spray fly, a white whirlwind, over the weather bow.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SEA AND ITS CHANCES

“ Now the great winds shoreward blow ;
Now the salt tides seaward flow ;
Now the wild white horses play,
Champ and chafe, and toss in spray.”

—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

NIGHT now lay on the sea, mere black, silent, unbreathing darkness. The signals of the coming storm were written on sky and sea in menacing characters; yet the tempest still lingered. Irene watched it all with half-shuddering interest. No entreaties could persuade her to go below. Something in the air, in the look of the heavens, in the deep undertone of the sea, thrilled her, fascinated her, terrified her! She sat under the shelter of the bulwark, watching the frowning skies and listening to the rising cadence of the wind.

Suddenly the squall was on them! There was a wild scuffling in the upper chambers of the air; the next moment the screaming winds were raving over the brig. Irene, from her shelter, could see the lower masts aslant in the gale, and the figures of the watch, as they pulled at the ropes or clustered under the lee of the boats. Furious rain squalls

came up from the south-west; the wild seas rose in the gloom, towering ever higher, and flung themselves on the labouring brig. The night had gathered a new and sudden blackness. The gale seemed to sob and hiss through the bare rigging; the decks hummed to the fury of the wind-driven rain.

Then just at the moment when one of these squalls was at its fiercest, there rose a wild cry from the head of the brig—

“Ship right ahead!”

A dim black mass, driving fast before the wind—the foam rising high at her stem—became obscurely visible. The unknown ship came on, till her dark hull seemed to loom high above the leaning brig. With a wave of Gaunt's arm the wheel had been whirled round; but the brig for one dreadful moment hung in the gale, and that black, rushing mass, flung up by a great sea, seemed poised above her. It seemed as if it must crash down upon her! At that moment mere black and merciless death seemed to be leaping on the *Hirondelle*. And yet Irene once more found time to note the coolness, the quick decision of Gaunt. He sent his voice like a trumpet through the gale and the darkness—

“Show the head of the foretopmast staysail!”

To Irene's untrained ears the order was unintelligible; but she noted how the stern voice seemed to pierce the tumult as with the stroke of a sword-edge, and its effect was almost instantaneous. Up went a slatting sheet of wet canvas; the wind caught

it, the brig fell off. Then the oncoming ship—a vision of power and terror—swept into the light of the battle-lanterns which gleamed along the wet deck.

The white spray was leaping up to her cat-heads; her bowsprit was dripping with foam. Irene, with terrified eyes, saw the black, wall-like hull, the gleam of wet guns; the whole dark mass seemed to tower above her. But the ship was now moving on a course parallel with the *Hirondelle*, instead of threatening to cut her down. Knot after knot of white faces peering above the stranger's bulwarks appeared and vanished. An officer had leaped into her main-chains. His cap had been blown off; he was bare-headed; gold gleamed on his shoulders. He lifted his speaking-trumpet to his lips, but his hail was drowned by the voice of the hooting wind.

The great ship whirled past, her quarter lanterns glimmered, a zigzag ribbon of light on the darkness; in another moment they were points of brightness, far astern. It was a big frigate, running before the gale, under close-reefed topsails.

"That was a close shave, Rene," said Litton, coming up to his sister, where she crouched under the bulwarks. "But," he added, with a midddy's cheerful philosophy, "a miss is as good as a mile."

Irene thought that view of the escape almost wicked. Death had breathed on them, had touched them! She had felt the chilling airs that blow from that dark presence. And yet it had passed by them! At that moment Gaunt came up, with a smile that

showed his white teeth in the semi-darkness; yet there was a frown in his eyes.

"Did it frighten you, Miss Litton?" he asked; and Irene somehow felt that an unconscious resentment burned in Gaunt's mind against the stranger—not because of the peril to the brig, but because of a possible alarm to her.

"We have a rough night before us," Gaunt went on, "and you must go below;" and Irene, who found the black night and the blacker sea, and the gale that screamed through both, too much for her girl's nerves, meekly obeyed. But for hours she lay and listened to the tumult of sound above her; the hooting wind, the pounding blocks, the groan of straining timbers, the crash of falling seas, the tread of hurrying feet, and occasionally the cry of an officer's voice giving orders.

The whole brig was one echoing tympanum for the storm, beaten and blown upon incessantly; a mere cave of terrifying sound. And every now and again a note thrilled above the tumult with sudden and ear-piercing shrillness. It was the voice of a squall coming up through the night.

Morning came at last, with wild winds and wild sea, and a sky wilder than either. The grey, struggling half-light of the dawn was shot through with angry gleams of fire. But the brig was a splendid sea-boat, and was splendidly handled. By noon the gale was dry, though still fierce; the seas were long and regular, and Irene ventured on deck again.

The brig, she found, was hove-to, and the seas, to the girl's dazed and unfamiliar eyes, were more threatening than ever. They came in mighty ridges, mere Alpine heights of water, cliffs of deepest green, edged and crested with foam, and with the scale of mountain ranges. With their vast height and rush, as they came racing on, they threatened to overwhelm the tiny *Hirondelle*. But up the steep, rushing slope of green water the gallant boat climbed; she hung, poised on the blowing crest for a moment, while the keen gale sang in her shrouds, and hummed in the scanty canvas she showed; then she plunged down the further slope, while the great sea, cheated of its prey, roared and thundered, a tumult of hissing foam, far astern.

To Irene, the conquest of each great wave in turn seemed nothing less than a miracle. Nay! she was looking on a procession of miracles, a hurrying succession of breathless escapes. The brig was flung alternately to the very edge of doom, and then plucked back again.

Irene stood long at the companion-way, watching the spectacle. The keen wind blew fiercely upon her. But she had a brave spirit, and she realised at last the triumph of the buoyant and gallant craft over the fury of the climbing waves, and the cool seamanship that kept the brig safe amidst that welter of raging waters. Then the blood ran warmer through her veins: it flushed her cheeks, and gave brightness to her eyes. And Gaunt, seeing that vivid countenance, with its sparkling eyes, framed in the

companion-way—the hair blown back by the gale—thought it fairer even than when set in an arch of apple blossoms in some green lane in Guernsey.

By three o'clock the gale had broken. The sea ran easier. The helm was put up, and, under jib and topsails, the brig ran on her course, rolling in the green seas until her decks were awash, and then sheering ahead as she rose from a swell. A couple of hours later, the sea being still rough, Irene was clinging to the rail, watching the men who were at work in the head of the brig replacing a damaged foremast stay.

A seaman—it was Johnson—had clambered out on to the lee fore-chains to gather in the slack, and Irene watched breathlessly when the brig rolled to leeward. The waves seemed to leap at the careless sailor, the foam whirled round his feet. Presently a gust of wind struck the brig, she gave a sudden roll, and Johnson, caught at that moment off his guard by a big wave, was torn from his hold and sent whirling to leeward.

"Man overboard!" rose the sudden cry. A hatch-grating was lying near, and a couple of seamen seized it and flung it over, as a sort of buoy. Gaunt was on the deck, and his voice rose sharp and clear above the confusion—

"Down with the helm! Man the fore clew-garnets!"

The brig swung up into the wind.

"Clear away the quarter-boat!"

He had leaped into the lee rigging, and was watch-

ing the figure of the seaman, now holding fast to the grating. Fraser, after the wild night, had turned in; the master's mate in charge of the deck at the moment Gaunt knew to be no boatman. The sea was still wild; to lower the boat, to steer it in that tumult of waters, needed the highest skill and coolness. The drift of the brig to leeward was so great that already the figure of Johnson was growing almost indistinguishable.

The moment was one for instant decision. A captain ought not to leave his ship under such circumstances; but the crisis was swift and urgent. Gaunt jumped into the boat, crying, "Come on, lads!" and a score of eager seamen sprang into the mizzen rigging to follow him. The boat was a light one, pulling four oars, and when four seamen had taken their places in it, Gaunt waved the rest back, and cried to lower away.

Irene had watched that suddenly evolving drama with blanched face; when Gaunt leaped into the boat she felt a chill, as of ice, creep through her very blood. But the quick-following incidents made no pause. By some mischance the fore-tackle jammed, while the stern-tackle ran freely; so the head of the boat was fixed, while the stern sank. It seemed as if the men would be emptied out on the sea. The sound of the wind, the flapping of canvas, the crash of the waves, made it difficult to hear the orders given; and, as the brig rolled, the stern of the half-lowered boat struck the sea heavily. Then, with the weather roll, the boat, with the figures in it, seemed

to take a flying leap into the air. Again and again that wild roll came and went; and Irene watched it with a face frozen with terror.

Sailors, however, show at their best in such a moment. Gaunt kept the stern-tackle tight, a seaman clambered nimbly out on the davit, and released the fore-tackle, the boat sank and was cleverly unhitched, and in a moment she was afloat and clear of the ship, and began to pull to windward. She seemed nothing but the frailest shell, tossing amid the dizzy, uncertain seas. But Gaunt, a perfect boatman, steered the tiny craft with admirable skill, and it seemed to Irene to float up the steep seas, one after another, as if by magic.

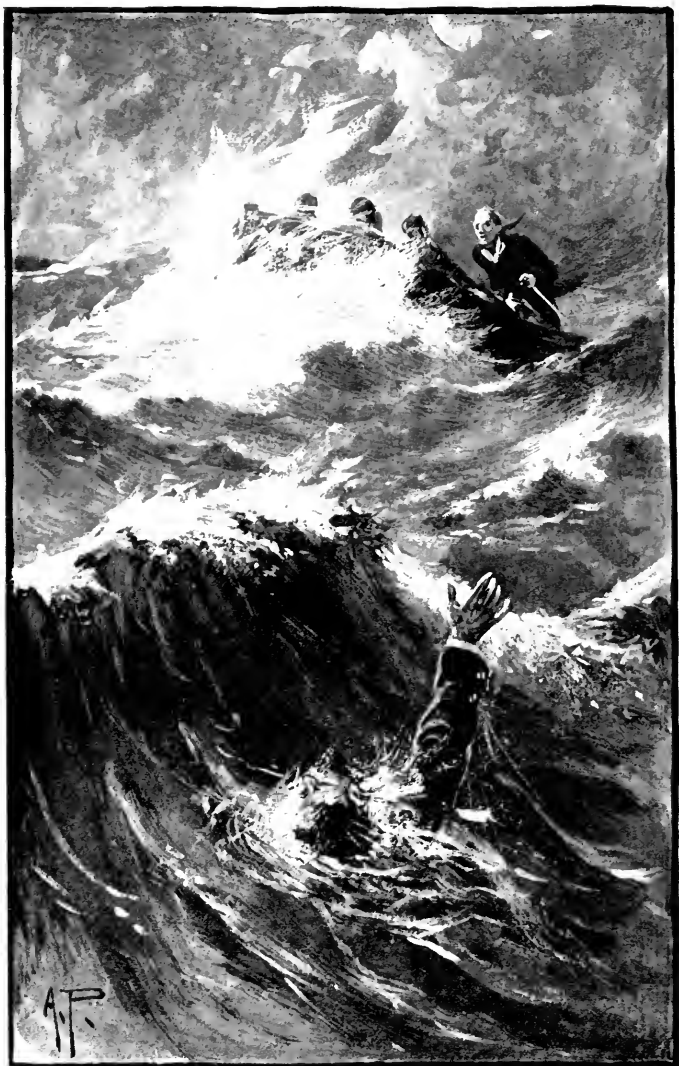
Gaunt presently stood up in the stern-sheets, keeping the tiller ropes in his hand, searching for the drowning man. At last he caught a glimpse of a waving arm; the men pulled with energy, the grating was reached, and Johnson was dragged safely and cleverly on board.

"Bravely done, boys!" gasped the big north-countryman, as he crouched, a bleached and dripping figure, at the bottom of the little gig.

Gaunt was now looking keenly across the windy stretch of wild sea to the brig; to reach her was a perilous task.

"Pull in that grating, lads," he said; "now stow it under the thwarts."

The men grudged the moments wasted in pulling the grating on board, and thought their captain's concern for economy was ill-timed.



"HE CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF A WAVING ARM"

“Now, lads,” he said with a smile, reading the doubt in their looks, “that grating is going to be useful to us.”

He knew that the pull back to the brig with the sea was a more risky business than even the pull to windward against it; and the grating would add to the buoyancy of the boat. And so it turned out.

The boat was safely put about; the men commenced to pull back to the brig. A great sea rose astern, and raced down on them; in the air above them was the voice of a squall at that moment coming up. Irene was watching the boat making its gallant fight; she saw the on-coming of the great sea; the boat's stern rose high, her bows sank, it was driven forward by the pursuing water, and simply vanished! All that Irene could see was the rushing foam of the broken waters. The boat had gone down! She closed her eyes in a half-swoon of terror.

“There she is, waddling like a duck,” cried an eager seaman high up in the ratlines.

Yes! The wave had broken clean over the boat, and submerged her; yet she did not sink. She was of a peculiar lightness, and the grating helped to make her almost as buoyant as a lifeboat. She had kept on an even keel when the sea swept over her; and so still floated. Irene saw the dripping figures emerge and begin to bale out the water from the half-submerged boat with their tarpaulins. Again and again that dreadful sight of the pursuing sea and the apparently overwhelmed boat was repeated.

At last Gaunt gave up the attempt to run with

the sea. He bore away until he brought the boat's head to the wind, and hung on there while the brig wore, made a long stretch to windward, and then ran down to her.

The men cheered heartily as the half-dozen dripping figures clambered on board. Johnson turned round and touched his forelock to Gaunt.

"Thank you, sir," was all he said.

"Give the men a double allowance, Fraser," said Gaunt; and to Irene's wonder the whole heroic and thrilling incident was dismissed in that prosaic fashion. It was the tamest anti-climax.

Sir John was standing beside Irene at the break of the companion, as Gaunt turned to go to his cabin and change his dripping clothes.

"That was finely done," cried Sir John, his red face redder still with excitement.

"All in the day's work, sir," Gaunt replied with a laugh; "we couldn't let so fine a fellow as Johnson drown," and he ran down the steps. But the light in Irene's eyes seemed to warm his very blood.

Two days after the gale the brig ran into Kingston Harbour. The corvette, which had made even worse weather of it in the gale than the brig, came in later in the same day, the British flag flying above the French.

Gaunt had said no word of love to Irene during the trip; she and her father were his guests, and the situation carried with it honourable restraints. This sailor lover was probably unconscious, however, of the entire frankness with which his eyes proclaimed

the state of his affections, not merely to Irene, but to mankind at large. Irene, on her part, bore herself with a soft but natural frankness that Gaunt found charming; but there was a half-proud shyness running through her frankness which sometimes delighted and sometimes alarmed him.

Sir John, meanwhile, had learned his lesson, and was manly enough to acknowledge it. He drew Gaunt aside before going ashore, and said, with red-faced awkwardness—

“Commander Gaunt”—he was careful not to lapse into the colloquial but inaccurate “captain”—“I was, perhaps, too hasty and too blunt when I spoke to you about Miss Litton at the Hall. We owe you a great debt, and I have learned a little more about you than I knew then. Miss Litton is too young to be bothered with lovers, or entangled with engagements yet. But I will say this much: when you have got the epaulette on the other shoulder, if you are of the same mind you may speak to me again. And we’ll be glad to see you at Litton Hall when you are on leave.”

This was pleasant, and yet Gaunt almost wished it had not been said. He would fain have carried into his love affairs the methods of his profession and have captured Irene, so to speak, by *coup de main*. He would have weathered on Sir John with as much of decision and fire as on a French corvette. Within twenty-four hours of their ceasing to be his guests he would have borne down on that worthy knight, and carried off his daughter from beneath his very eyes.

But Sir John's little speech changed the situation. *Noblesse oblige!* He could not fire on a friendly flag. He contemplated Sir John's red face, on which shone a spacious and benevolent smile, almost with regret. The methods of war would have been so much more expeditious than the leisurely and decorous arts of peace! Still, he must accept the flag of truce.

"Mind," Sir John continued, "there's no engagement, and there's no promise."

"I accept that," said Gaunt, with a frank smile. "I'll try to show myself worthy of Miss Litton; and by God's help," he added with energy, "I'll win her."

Sir John frowned, as though he still thought that confidence a little too robust; but, after a moment's hesitation, he allowed it to pass. So Gaunt parted with Irene, saying nothing of his hopes save what his eyes could convey, and they had a meaning and fire, at the moment of farewell, before which Irene's eyes drooped, spite of herself.

"Uncle Insects" looked, half in forgiveness, half in rebuke, at Gaunt, as they parted.

"You brought us through that gale cleverly," he said; "but, Commander Gaunt, I wish your jacket was of another colour," and, with a frown on his brow which the kindly gleam behind the twin moons of his huge glasses contradicted, "Uncle Insects" followed his niece into the boat which was to convey them ashore.

CHAPTER XXII

WITH NELSON

“ . . . Thy track across the fretful foam
Of vehement actions without scope or term,
Called history, keeps a splendour.”

—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

GAUNT lost no time in starting on his return to Cadiz—or Lisbon, whichever might be Jervis' headquarters—and, as the *Hirondelle* drove eastward before a rising gale, Gaunt looked back, half in gladness and half in doubt, on the crowded events of the last few weeks. He had rescued Irene and her father from the unclean hands of Captain Giron, and this was an incident of golden and unforgettable quality. He had captured *La Mulette*, too, and so stopped her marauding cruise in West Indian waters almost before it had begun; and this must stand to his credit. But Captain Giron himself had escaped, taking the much-desired despatches with him. Would his admiral treat the result of his expedition as a success or a failure? Gaunt was still in doubt on this subject, after he had reached the blockading fleet off Cadiz, and reported himself to Sir John Jervis.

The admiral threw Gaunt's written report on the

table, and asked for his story in a few words. He listened to Gaunt's narrative, looking at him with hard eyes and in discontented silence.

"It was a pretty bit of work, cutting out *La Mulette*," he said grudgingly, "though you took two bites to a cherry. But," he added with a frown, "you got the trap and let the rat escape! A scamp like that Frenchman will soon be afloat again, and will make himself a terror in West Indian waters. The work will all have to be done over again," he added discontentedly.

Jervis was a hard master to serve, and Gaunt left the old admiral's cabin feeling that he had been rebuked, rather than praised.

A stretch of uneventful service followed; but great events were stirring, and suddenly the *Hirondelle* was caught in their fierce eddy.

Gaunt, on a day early in the following May, was returning to the *Hirondelle* from a visit to the flagship; and Fraser, who was watching the approaching boat, could see, from the way the men bent to their oars, it brought news.

"Nelson is off to the Mediterranean to look in at Toulon," Gaunt cried to Fraser, as he sprang on the deck of the brig, "and we are off with him."

"That's good news," replied Fraser, with a delighted smile. "It's a risky thing going into the Mediterranean with anything less than a fleet, but it will be better than hanging here off Cadiz, and running endless errands to Lisbon and Gibraltar."

"Yes! a thousand times over! Our work of late

has been as tame as fishing for flounders. Other fellows have had the fun and we've had the hard work. But this is a change! We sail on the 1st. Nelson flies his flag in the *Vanguard*, and takes the *Orion* and the *Alexander*, and some frigates. There is something big on foot in the French ports, and they are to find out what it is; and the little *Hiron-delle* will help in that business."

The news was eagerly discussed fore and aft, and in every watch, and was welcomed with rejoicing expletives. The Mediterranean had been surrendered for many months to the fleets of France and Spain; but now the British flag was to appear in its waters once more. Nelson had not yet the terrible fame that the Nile was to give him. The failure at Teneriffe lay heavy on him; but even that heroic "failure" helped to stamp his image on the imagination of all sailors. Already, to go with him on any errand was accepted as an excursion into splendid realms of daring and adventure.

And, somehow, there was in men's minds everywhere, at that moment, the sense of a gathering tempest. The whisper of some mighty expedition, preparing under the cloak of darkness for an unknown adventure, was in the very air. A great fleet was being organised in French harbours, designed to sally out at some unexpected moment and overwhelm some doomed land; but which, no man could guess. It might be Ireland, or Portugal, or Sardinia, or Egypt!

The Mediterranean was empty of British sails.

For months no British keel had stirred its waters. But from every port in the south of France came the sound of mighty preparations. Toulon and Genoa, Civita Vecchia, and the harbours of Corsica bristled with masts, and rang with the iron music of hammers. A fleet of unknown scale and of un-guessed destination was being organised; and Nelson with his tiny squadron—a few quick ships of formidable fighting quality—was despatched to discover the secret that was disquieting half Europe.

By the 18th the squadron was off Toulon; and from the tops of the British ships many shrewd eyes searched the Toulon roads. A hundred masts could be seen over the low coast-line; there was plainly some great force mustered there; but what was its nature, or its scale, or its goal, could not be guessed. The heavy guns that flashed from a score of batteries forbade the too near approach of the British ships.

On the 19th Gaunt was summoned to the *Vanguard*, and found himself in the rear-admiral's cabin. He looked with keen curiosity at the great sailor. Nelson had guests at his table that night, and was dressed with more than ordinary formality for dinner. The insignia of the Order of the Bath was on his breast, the gold medal for St. Vincent hung from his neck; and beneath its glittering disc was looped up the empty coat-sleeve—the grim mark Teneriffe had left upon him.

Nelson's attenuated figure, the close-shaven and almost boyish face, the carelessly brushed hair, the petulant lips, gave, at first, the impression of

insignificance, or even of weakness. But that impression vanished almost with his first word. The eager spirit lit up the expressive features. The frank, quick, challenging eyes, the air of swift intelligence, the flash of daring and of command, as he spoke, stamped him as a leader of men.

As Gaunt stood waiting, he saw that Nelson's brow was moody; he scarcely glanced at him.

"Well, Commander Gaunt," he said abruptly, "I was to send you to the admiral with news, and there is no news to send. The Frenchmen lie close, as close as frightened rats in their holes. Nothing comes out; and, what with batteries on the cliffs, and row-boats across the harbour's mouth, we can't get in. There's something behind that impenetrable screen, something beneath that forest of masts. But what there is," he added, with an irritable twitch of his arm, "there's no guessing."

"Perhaps I could get news, sir," said Gaunt quietly.

Nelson stopped in his walk and glanced at Gaunt with a flash of his quick eye.

"Yes, sir. I know Toulon; I think I could get ashore safely; and I talk French well enough to deceive a gendarme. I have friends, too, there."

"Friends?" asked Nelson, with a frown.

"Yes, a Royalist family that helped me to escape, and from whom I think I could get any information there is afloat."

Nelson listened, with his eyes fixed on Gaunt's face.

"Yes," he said meditatively, "I have heard you were a prisoner there, and made a plucky escape; and you must have some knowledge of the place. How would you get ashore? Where would you land?" he went on briskly. "Where's the chart?"

Nelson sat down at the table, pulled, with his left hand, the open chart to him, and eagerly listened while Gaunt explained his plans. For Gaunt's quick brain had been at work on the problem of how to get news before his interview with Nelson. He had thought out all details.

"I should land here, sir, under the lee of the Tourelle headland. The guns on Cape Brun command the spot, but a boat running close under the cliff can't be seen from the battery. There are no houses on the cliff above, and it's only two miles from the harbour. I should find out my friends, collect what information I can, and get back to the beach. The boat would lie off till I signalled, and then pull in and take me off."

Nelson listened keenly, and discussed details and poured out suggestions with the eager interest of a brother lieutenant.

"Yes, Gaunt," he said at last, rising, "you shall go in. You may pick up some valuable information, and the chances are worth the risk. Take a strong boat's crew," he added. "There are French row-boats about. If you are to run you'll want the oars, and if you are to fight you will want the cutlasses. Good-bye, and good luck! I'll expect

your report in the morning;" and Gaunt went off, with a new fire of generous courage burning in his blood, kindled from Nelson's touch and look.

That night at 11 o'clock the *Hirondelle*, with lights shrouded, was lying-to about a mile and a half off Cape Brun. The davits had been greased, the longboat was lowered without noise, and Gaunt set off on his perilous expedition. The boat pulled ten oars, and Gaunt had double-banked each oar. If he had to run for it he must run fast. If he stumbled in the dark on a French row-boat, as Nelson said, he would "want the cutlasses;" and twenty British seamen would give a good account of themselves. The men were rigged out to look as much as possible like a French crew. He left Fraser in charge of the brig; Johnson held the tiller in the stern-sheets beside him. Litton had jumped, unrebuked, into the boat, and sat near him.

The muffled oars gave hardly any sound; and, steering by the stars, the boat crept through the darkness, keeping the shadowy heights of Cape Brun on the port bow. A northerly wind was getting up as they pushed off, and Gaunt noted, with some anxiety, that the wind had every promise of hardening to a gale. As they neared the land, they heard the sound of the waves, by this time running high, and breaking heavily on the shore.

"It will be rough landing," said Litton, in a low voice; "perhaps too rough."

"We'll try it, at all events," replied Gaunt.

The oars had slowed down, and Gaunt was searching the low, dark shore for a landing-place, when Johnson said to him quietly—

"There's a craft coming up in the darkness, sir; there to port."

Gaunt looked quickly. Yes, a tall pyramid of sail was dimly visible in the gloom. It swung in a wide arc, as the hull beneath rolled in the sea. Gaunt could hear, already, the wash of the unknown craft's cutwater, so near were they. While Gaunt was still peering through the darkness, a voice rang in the air above them, in French—

"Hola the boat! What are you?"

Some quick-eyed look-out had caught a glimpse of the boat, and had hailed, and Gaunt could hear the sound of running feet on the unknown craft's deck as the officer came hastily forward. The stranger, as yet, had shown no light, but now a sudden flare was made, half-a-dozen faces showing pallid in its light.

Gaunt, meanwhile, answered in French, without a moment's hesitation—

"We are the guard-boat! What craft is that?" And he threw a note of sonorous command into his voice that effectually tricked the listeners.

The answer came through the gloom—

"*L'Espion*, despatch-boat."

"'Despatch-boat,'" repeated Gaunt softly. "We are going in to seek information, and here it's coming out to meet us! The sloop has spoiled our landing,

but we'll take her out if she gives us a chance. Tell the men to get ready for a jump," he whispered to Johnson.

The boat was drifting past the sloop, half-seen in the glare of the lantern, and Gaunt was shouting questions, in high-pitched French, to the officer of the watch, while Johnson was quietly giving directions to the men.

"Get ready, lads! The Frenchman has kindly come out to save us trouble. There's nothing like politeness! We'll make a jump at her in a moment. Hook on at the bows there, the moment you are near enough. Let your oars swing when the captain gives the word; and then it's every man on board except the man in the bows."

There was a low shuffle through the whole length of the boat, as the men shook their cutlasses free, and drew up their feet for a spring.

The sloop had backed her foresail at the boat's challenge, and was now rolling heavily in the beam-sea as she forged slowly ahead. To close on her was a risky business; the thwarts of the boat would be smashed if the sinking counter of the sloop caught her. Gaunt watched keenly, and suddenly thrust the helm to port, and so brought the boat round close under the sloop's stern. The bow-man caught the rudder-chain with his boathook. A rope, in the slovenly French fashion, hung over the stern, and, as the boat rose, Johnson, who had gone forward, caught it. It ran freely for a few feet, then jammed.

"Make fast there," said Gaunt; and, in a moment,

a rope from the boat was hitched to it. Apparently the Frenchmen had lost sight of the boat in the darkness, and took for granted it had passed on. The yards were being trimmed; in a couple of minutes it would be on its course again. But Gaunt, meanwhile, who had gone forward, caught the rope, and, putting his weight upon it, found it held.

"Follow me, Johnson," he whispered; and, active as a monkey, and as silent—for he had slipped the sheath of his cutlass inside his belt, that it should not clash—he went up the rope, hand over hand, caught the Frenchman's taffrail, and swung himself over the rail.

In the darkness no one saw him. As it happened, a low weather shelter covered the wheel, and limited the gaze of the helmsman aft. The seaman at the wheel, moreover, was at that moment looking intently forward, waiting for the order to put up his helm. An officer stood, with his hand on the bulwark, a few yards ahead. Gaunt heard the sound of scuffling behind him, and turned to look. The broad shoulders of Johnson were just coming over the rail. Gaunt seized a coil of rope lying on the deck, and threw the loose end of it into the boat; and the British sailors were in another moment swarming up at two points. It seemed amazing that no one saw or heard them.

A dozen sailors were already up, and Gaunt made them crouch below the rail of the sloop; but unless the advantage of the surprise was to be lost, he must make his rush at once.

“Get the helm, Johnson,” he whispered, “and leave Hicks there; then we’ll make our charge.”

Johnson quietly touched one of the seamen; then, lifting up his tall figure, softly stepped to the unconscious helmsman. He caught him suddenly by the collar and shoulder, shook him with a jerk which almost dislocated the astonished Frenchman’s neck, and flung him into the lee-scuppers, where he lay stunned. The French officer at that moment looked round, attracted by the sound. Hicks had coolly seized the wheel; and in an instant, without word or shout, Gaunt and his men charged forward.

Johnson led; even Gaunt’s fierce activity or Litton’s light-footed speed could not outrun the big seaman’s charge. The French officer was struck senseless with a blow from the hilt of a cutlass; the scattered watch on the deck were swept like chaff before the rush. A British sailor closed the companion door, making the officers in the cabin prisoners.

In the head of the sloop a brief but furious combat raged. The Frenchmen were taken completely by surprise; but they outnumbered their assailants, and, with any weapons lying at hand, snatched hastily up, they fought with fine spirit. The chief struggle took place at the hatch leading to the forecastle. Johnson had broken his cutlass, but he picked up a capstan bar, and, standing astride the hatch, he beat down the men struggling to reach the deck. The unfortunate Frenchmen shrank at last from that terrible figure, with its swinging bar

and terrific blows, and the hatch was slipped on. Some of the Frenchmen had fled to the rigging, and the eager sailors were in fierce pursuit; but Gaunt called them down.

"Let them alone, lads; they can do no harm. We'll attend to them by-and-by."

By this time the tumult of the fight, and the sparkle of one or two pistols, reached the battery on the cliff. A lantern flashed there; a rocket shot up, streaking the blackness of the night with a swift and vanishing thread of flame. Apparently a glimpse was caught of the sloop falling off with her head towards the open sea, and the next moment the sky was lit up by the flame of a great gun, and its roar rolled sullenly over the black sea.

"They are not likely to hit us," said Gaunt to Litton cheerfully, "and we'll soon be in the offing." And, to the harmless accompaniment of the bellowing guns, the captured Frenchman ran out from the land.

Gaunt found that his prize was a small corvette named *L'Espion*, evidently built for speed, and lightly armed, but with a crew of forty-five men; so the capture was a smart bit of work. *L'Espion* had been creeping to sea under the shadow of the land, hoping to escape the British squadron, when she stumbled on the *Hirondelle's* boat. Her captain was the officer who had been knocked down in the first rush; and when he recovered consciousness he could only lie blinking his eyes with fury at the trick which had cheated him, and with amazement

at the audacity with which his sloop had been captured under the very guns of the great cliff battery.

But the phrase used by *L'Espion's* look-out when Gaunt hailed was still in his ears. "A despatch-boat" surely meant a boat carrying despatches! A craft like *L'Espion* would not go stealing out at night, with a hostile squadron in the offing, without serious business on hand. A bundle of despatches from Toulon might prove to be of the greatest importance. The sloop's captain, indeed, denied energetically that he carried any documents of public value; but his denial counted for nothing.

Gaunt entered the captain's cabin, and made a patient search. It was a small, low room, with cot and desk and arms, and a big chest. The desk showed the usual official papers, but nothing of the nature of a despatch, and the closest search of the cabin yielded nothing of value in the way of information. The other cabins, in turn, were searched, but in vain. Gaunt then came back to the captain's room. He felt sure papers of value were there, and his eyes ran round the little cabin tirelessly.

He sounded every panel in search of any concealed hiding-place. He called Litton's quick senses to his help; but in vain. The despatches, if they existed, were concealed with great art. Perhaps some concealment had been sought which by its very simplicity would escape notice.

As Gaunt reflected on this, a ball of sennit hanging from a nail in a corner of the cabin caught his

attention. It seemed quite insignificant, a common object on shipboard; yet it was not the sort of thing to be found in the captain's cabin. It would have been more in place in the fore-castle! Gaunt took it down and squeezed it; then he began to patiently unravel it.

He had found his prize! A little bundle of paper was in the centre of the ball; the sennit had evidently been plaited round it for the purpose of concealment, and the ball had been hung, in an apparently careless fashion, on a nail, so as to evade observation. If the ship fell into the hands of an enemy, at least the despatches, in this way, would escape notice.

Gaunt smiled quietly, but Litton fairly danced with delight when the ingeniously hidden papers came to light. Part were in cipher, but there were also long catalogues of names, and Gaunt guessed that these were lists of the great fleet lying in Toulon. Here was a prize indeed!

A little after eight o'clock in the morning Gaunt was on board the *Vanguard*, and was promptly admitted to the rear-admiral's cabin.

"Well, Gaunt, we heard the guns talking from Cape Brun, and saw the rockets go up, and we guessed they had found you out. I suppose you didn't get ashore?"

"No, sir; we blundered in the dark up against a small French sloop. She reported herself a despatch-boat, so we rushed her, and brought her out."

"Smartly done, Gaunt," said Nelson, with a

laugh. Then he stepped to the port and looked out.

“Is that the Frenchman? A very pretty little model! You were lucky to get her; and with a single boat, too! Why, she must carry three times the number of your boat’s crew!”

“Not quite, sir; and we had the advantage of the surprise.”

Nelson smiled without replying; and Gaunt felt as if that one swift, frank smile of generous, if wordless, comprehension was reward enough for a hard night’s work.

“But did she carry despatches?” asked Nelson.

“She carried some papers, sir, which were carefully hidden, and so, I imagine, are of importance.”

Nelson caught them up eagerly, asked a few hurried questions, and then dismissed Gaunt.

At noon a signal from the *Vanguard* brought him on board the flagship again.

“Gaunt,” said Nelson, “your papers are of real value. They give us a pretty complete account of the fleet in Toulon; and, by G——, it’s big enough! The biggest fleet the French have gathered in one port for years. And there is a tremendous swarm of transports, too. There are fifteen ships of the line; nearly as many frigates; a crowd of lighter vessels, and transports enough to carry an army.

“Ay! and they are meant to carry an army,” Nelson went on energetically; “but where to; that’s the puzzle! And your papers don’t help us there. Oh! to catch that swarm of transports,

packed with French soldiers, in a gale at sea! To have the chance of trying Bonaparte on a wind!" And Nelson tramped to and fro across the cabin, the stump of his arm twitching furiously.

"Commander Gaunt," he said presently, and with a sudden touch of formality, "you have done a bit of admirable service, and I shall report so to Admiral Lord St. Vincent. Go back to the brig. We are going to have wild weather; but we'll hang on, in spite of that, until these French gentlemen come out, and we can see what they mean."

Gaunt went back to the *Hirondelle*, with Nelson's praise running like some strong wine in his blood. The little, battered, insignificant-looking rear-admiral had, somehow, a magic of look and speech, to which the souls of men answered as a harp might respond to the touch of some great player! No one could tell where the magic lay, or what was the undefinable quality in Nelson which made him unlike all the other gallant seamen of his day. But no one could deny, not many could resist, that strange charm!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GREAT FLEET COMES OUT

“The blackening wave is edged with white ;
To inch and rock the sea-mews fly ;
The fishes have heard the Water-Sprite,
Whose screams forbode that wreck is nigh.”

—SCOTT.

THE next day, the 19th, broke with a wild dawn. The sky at the horizon was yellow, shot with angry streaks of red ; at the zenith it was black, and peopled with flying clouds. The sea ran in long ridges, rising ever higher ; the wind was fast hardening to a gale from the north-west.

“This will be a rough day,” said Gaunt to Fraser, “and the big ships will make rough weather of it ; the *Vanguard* specially. She is a wet ship at best, and this north-wester will bring up a sea which will set every spar in the flagship shaking.”

By noon a gale was hooting in the upper chambers of the sky ; the British ships, holding on to their station, were rolling in a beam sea. The *Vanguard*, justifying her evil reputation, was wallowing, with her rails to port and starboard alternately under water. She was spray to her mainyard. The *Hiron-delle* ran down to her once, in response to a signal,

and the break of the seas against her leaning, cliff-like sides was like the surf on a half-tide rock when a gale is blowing. The great Gulf of Lyons seas—rushing walls of angry green—were flinging themselves on the labouring ship. She rose heavily after each wave, with streaming sides, wet canvas, and leaning masts—an image of desolation.

The brig, on the other hand, splendidly handled, rode the seas like a gull. Yet even on her a great beam sea every now and then leaped, covering her with blinding spray; while the crash of the falling waters sounded like thunder through the straining hull.

The ships hung on to their stations as long as they could, but at last had to wear and run before the wind; and then the heavy *Vanguard* was a pitiable object. A huge pursuing sea overtook her, and broke over her stern in one wild tumult of spray, beneath which the great ship seemed to disappear. Would she emerge from it? She rose heavily, and as if reluctantly.

"If she doesn't heave-to soon she will be past doing it," said Gaunt to Fraser.

At last the signal—a little flutter of wet flags from the *Vanguard's* peak—was given. Slowly and heavily the great ships came round in response; the *Vanguard* last of all. Her three lower topsails were flapping wildly in the gale as her head came heavily up to the wind. Just then a mountainous sea broke over her; she lay down to leeward till her lower yardarms were in the spume and foam of the waves.

“She’ll turn turtle!” cried Fraser.

The green waves roared above the black hull; a rain-squall swept over the sea, blinding the whole landscape, and with it came the gloom of the fast-darkening night. Gaunt strained his eyes to see the *Vanguard*; but she was gone!

All night the gale raved. Faintly, to leeward, gleamed, at times, the lights of the big ships, mere dancing pin-points of flame in the black cavern of the wind-tormented night. These grew ever fainter, and then vanished.

Dawn came at last, grey and cold. The weatherly little brig had held her ground better than the big battleships, and Gaunt climbed the brig’s topmast to search for the remainder of the squadron. The frigates were gone, blown out of sight. The *Alexander* and *Orion* were visible, with lowered topmasts and close-reefed lower topsails, making bad weather of it; but the *Vanguard* had vanished!

At last, searching the misty skyline, Gaunt caught a glimpse of her. She was a semi-wreck. Her foremast was gone; her mizzen topmast was hanging to leeward; her courses were in rags. While Gaunt watched, the *Alexander* and the *Orion* bore away to the help of the distressed flagship. A heavy rain-squall, coming up from the N.W., swept over the scene. It raged for nearly an hour, blinding the whole horizon, and, when it had passed, the sea was empty! Of all the squadron, the gallant little *Hiron-delle* alone kept watch outside Toulon and the great fleet lying in its waters.

"Well," said Gaunt to Fraser, with a laugh, as he shook the spray from his face and hair, "here's sea-impudence for you! Here's a 16-gun brig blockading a fleet."

It seemed true. To leeward was only the wild sea, the grey, wintry sky, broken by no speck of distant sail. *Vanguard*, *Alexander*, *Orion* — all had vanished! The little *Hirondelle* was left without a consort, and was majestically keeping guard over a fleet!

"I'll hang on," said Gaunt, "till the Frenchmen come out, or till Nelson returns; and I think it won't be long before the Frenchmen do show their noses out of the harbour. But, from the last glimpse we caught of the *Vanguard*, it seems clear she must run somewhere to refit, before she can take her post off Toulon. When the French two-deckers come out we must clear off."

At noon, as Gaunt had guessed, the Frenchmen were plainly coming out! A great line-of-battle ship was visible, tossing heavily in the wild sea as she cleared the port. Then came another, and yet another. The sky to the north-east was soon thick with crowded masts. Gaunt climbed to the brig's topmast with Fraser, and, though the air was still obscured with flying spray, and the gale shrieked overhead, he watched, at leisure, the wonderful spectacle. The French ships were taking advantage of the gale to run out to sea. They had topmasts struck, showed very scanty canvas, and rolled wildly in the great waves; yet they had a look of formidable and disciplined strength.

“What a crowd!” cried Fraser, as the long line of tossing ships, running before the wind, stretched on interminably. “It’s not a squadron; it’s a fleet, and a big one, too! What a splendid ship!” he cried the next moment, as a majestic two-decker came on towering over her sister ships, and ploughing her way across the great waves.

“That’s the *Franklin*,” said Gaunt, “a 90-gun ship. I saw her lying in Toulon, and there’s no finer two-decker afloat. She carries weight of metal enough for one of our three-deckers.”

“But, look! There is a bigger ship still thrusting her nose out. What a monster!”

“That must be the *Orient*, the flagship. She carries 120 guns, and there’s nothing bigger on the sea. She could match guns with the *Santissima Trinidad*, and in fighting power would knock her to chips.”

The great ship, a cluster of wildly-blowing flags at her peak, was an image of pride and strength. But, though she knew it not, all that majesty of warlike force was to vanish in one fierce blast of midnight flame at the Nile, not two months distant!

Still the great fleet came on, till the whole horizon to windward was pricked with masts. Gaunt had counted thirteen ships of the line, and nine frigates, with a fringe of corvettes and brigs; now came an irregular mass of transports. The far-stretching swarm was still curving out of Toulon, while, of the van, only the topmasts could be seen, fretting the skyline to the east. Gaunt counted 170 transports,

and the stream of ships flowed on without sign of pause.

"It's more than a fleet," said Gaunt; "it's an expedition. That's an army afloat."

Some great scheme of invasion and conquest was plainly on foot; and against what ill-fated nation was it launched? What the crew of the *Hirondelle* saw was the armed strength of the Republic—that new and terrible military power which had struck down the pride of Austria, and overrun Italy, and was yet to overshadow the world. Now, in that vast array of tossing ships, it was coming out, under the wild sky and across the wild sea—the tempest driving it—on some new and unguessed scheme of rapine and invasion. Gaunt, in a word, looked on the great fleet which was carrying Napoleon to Egypt. His face grew dark with care, as his eyes dwelt on the far-stretching scale of the mighty expedition. On what ill-fated shore was it to break? What power could match a force so gigantic?

A glow of intoxicating exultation would have run through his blood had he known that, with all its pride and majesty, that great fleet was to perish, only six weeks later, under Nelson's guns at the Nile!

But Gaunt had no gift of prophetic vision, and his brow was heavy with thought, as he studied the numbers of the French ships, and tried to guess their destination. Was the great armament meant to sweep the narrow seas, and to break with devastating fury on England, or on the shores of Ireland? Was Portugal menaced, or Sicily? Or



"AGAINST WHAT ILL-FATED NATION WAS IT LAUNCHED?"

was there some wild, dim scheme of conquest, still further east, on foot? The new, mysterious, formless power bred of the Revolution was made visible under his eyes; and where was Nelson?

Gaunt searched the sea to leeward with anxious eyes, but it was empty. The squadron, whose business it was to watch Toulon, had been blown into mere space just when the great fleet of its enemies came out.

Fraser had gone down; Gaunt sat alone, perched high on the wildly swaying topmast of the brig. What was his best course? The brig was hanging on the flank of the emerging fleet; should he hang there still, till its course became plain, and till Nelson was sighted? But when would Nelson reappear? The sorely damaged *Vanguard* might be driven to Gibraltar to refit. And Gaunt felt that the news the French fleet were at sea, and at sea on such a scale, and with transports enough to carry an army, was news of the utmost importance. He must carry it to Cadiz, or to Lisbon, without the loss of a moment. On it might well hang the fate of whole kingdoms.

When night fell, the north-eastern horizon was flecked with dancing lights, the signal fires of the French fleet. But the *Hirondelle*, with every inch of canvas spread, was flying westerly before the gale, bearing the great news to Cadiz.

On the 23rd the brig was off the Spanish port, and Gaunt quickly stood in the cabin of the *Ville de Paris*, the admiral's flagship, and told his news.

The old admiral listened silently, but his eyes dwelt with a certain grim approval on the young sailor, as he told his tale. Care and thought carve the features as subtly and deeply as Time itself; and Gaunt's face bore the mark of these forces. Yet he looked the very type of keen intelligence and alert seamanship.

"It's great news, Gaunt," the admiral said; "but it's what we expected. You are a lucky fellow to have seen that sight; and the *Hirondelle* must be a good sea-boat to hang on when the squadron was blown off. Yes! you have rendered good service. But," he added, with a sudden touch of ill-humour, "it would have been better service still if you had brought news of the Frenchmen's destination. You should have kept on their tracks for a couple of days."

"In that case, sir, the news might have reached you two days later. I thought it my duty to lose no time."

Jervis gave a dissatisfied grunt.

"You bring me news of a great peril," he said; "but nothing which will help me to meet it."

Gaunt could forgive the stern old sailor's discontent. He looked at him afresh, his brow was heavy with care, his face dark with anxiety.

"Nelson is not at Gibraltar," continued Jervis. "You might have known him better than to imagine he would give up lightly his post off Toulon. He will repair somewhere, and somehow, and be back before this. He will find the port empty and the fleet vanished, and no one knows where;" and

St. Vincent fell into a mood of troubled thought, while Gaunt stood silent, waiting.

“Yes, you made a mistake, Gaunt, and it may cost us dear. Report yourself for orders to-morrow,” concluded St. Vincent abruptly, and Gaunt left the admiral’s cabin, finding he was held guilty of a blunder, where he believed he had rendered a service! The stern old seaman’s standard of service was high, both for himself and for everybody under his flag.

CHAPTER XXIV

OFF SYRACUSE

“Anon we return, being gathered again,
Across the sad valleys all drabbed with rain—
Across the grey ridges all crisped and curled—
To join the long dance round the curve of the world.”

—KIPLING'S *Cruisers*.

TO Gaunt's vexation, he was, for the next few weeks, caught in a back-eddy of the hurrying stream of great events. Somewhere in the Mediterranean two great fleets were engaged in a sort of shadow-dance of flight and pursuit. Any hour might bring the deep roll of the guns of Brueys' ships and of Nelson's as they closed in the shock of battle. But the *Hirondelle* was kept busy carrying tame messages betwixt one cluster of blockading ships and another.

At last came the commission for a wider flight. Gaunt received orders to run eastward with despatches in search of Nelson, who since the early days of June had been in furious but vain pursuit of the great French fleet which had broken out from Toulon. When to the south of Sardinia, Gaunt learned from a merchant ship that Nelson's squadron was lying in Syracuse, where it had gone

to refit, and he put up his helm and ran, under all canvas, for that port.

The sun was setting on July 25 when the *Hiron-delle*, some ten miles off the entrance to Syracuse, met the British fleet coming out of the harbour. There were two stately lines of seven ships each, grim, ordered, and workmanlike. The great ships had left San Pietro on June 7, in pursuit of the mysterious fleet Gaunt had seen coming out in the wild north-wester, and had swept the sea in vain from Toulon to Alexandria, and back to Syracuse, with a wide northerly curve to the coast of Karamania. But the French ships resembled a fleet of phantoms! No glimpse of them could be caught. And the British squadron, by this time, showed signs of the severity of their pursuit.

One ship was under jury masts; all were sea-stained and storm-battered, with no gleam of flag nor glory of paint. Yet these fourteen great ships were the flower of the British navy. The *Culloden* led one column, the *Vanguard* another, and Gaunt, as he watched them, felt a thrill of pride run through his veins. Here was a fleet fit to carry the fate of England.

The wind was soft, the great hulls moved on their path with slow majesty, and Gaunt, running down to the flagship, signalled that he brought despatches, and was ordered to report himself on board.

Gaunt looked curiously at Nelson when he entered the rear-admiral's cabin. He had changed in the brief space of little over eight weeks, since he saw

him off Toulon. The fretting cares of the great chase had written their signature on his face. His figure was more attenuated than ever—attenuated to the point of an almost painful fragility, as though the flame of his tireless energy had burned his very flesh away. An aspect of mingled care and fierceness lay on his countenance. Every line on it was sharpened. The drooping lid of one eye—a legacy from Ceuta—hid the shrivelled ball; but the other eye—large, bright, penetrating—had in it a gleam of steel. The long pursuit had, indeed, written strange scars on the great sailor.

He was within seven days of the victory of the Nile, though he knew it not; but the seven weeks behind of mocked hopes, of overwhelming responsibilities, and of tireless and baffled effort, had broken his strength.

There is no other sea-hunt like that in all history; but its very fierceness, in a sense, defeated itself. Nelson left Malta on June 22, as he believed six days—as a matter of fact, only three days—behind the French; and driving his heavy seventy-fours—one of them under jury masts—with sleepless energy, he outsailed his prey. The French had the quicker ships; but British seamanship and Nelson's fiery purpose gave the slower ships the lead. The "man at the helm," like "the man behind the gun," counts!

On June 29 Nelson reached Alexandria—and found it empty. Brueys' great fleet seemed to have vanished from the face of the seas. Fate had been

cruel to Nelson; more cruel than even he knew. The very night after he left Malta the two fleets crossed each other's track. Nelson's enemy was under his lee; but no gleam of discovering light, no sound of warning bell, gave any signal. For two days the hostile fleets were within a hundred miles of each other, and the crowded French transports, with 30,000 soldiers on board—most of them seasick—were within easy reach of Nelson's seventy-fours. But so wide is the sea, so deep its loneliness, so deceptive its spaces, that Nelson, searching the skyline with his keenest outlooks, caught no glimpse of his enemy, and drove on his fierce way to Alexandria, to find it empty!

In all these weeks Nelson was, in a sense, the chased, as well as the chaser. He was hag-ridden with anxieties. The phantom of the French fleet ran before him. Could he reach it he was sure of victory; but victory, while it beckoned, mocked him! He was pursuing a fleet of ghosts! His flag flew over fourteen of the best fighting ships the sea ever carried; the honour and fate of England were in his hands. His restless brain was busy, day and night, planning methods of attack; but the long pursuit was a nightmare, and the French ships seemed mere air-drawn phantoms—a hurrying fleet of shadows.

Within a day of his interview with Gaunt, Nelson was to get certain news of his enemy, and the long uncertainty of the pursuit was to end. But at the moment when Gaunt stood in his cabin, that uncertainty was at its blackest, and Nelson's failure was

most complete. "I have gone," he wrote on that same day, "a round of 600 leagues with expedition incredible, and am as ignorant of the situation of the enemy as I was twenty-seven days ago." It was his dark hour!

Nelson took Gaunt's despatches with a careless hand, and flung them on the table. They came from Cadiz; they could only bring criticisms and orders. They could tell him nothing of the enemy he had chased so fiercely and so vainly.

"Well, sir," he said, looking up to Gaunt; "we parted company off Toulon, and I understand you saw the French come out?"

"Yes, sir."

Nelson looked at him with a certain fierce envy. "Why," he said, "yours is the last pair of English eyes that saw Monsieur Brueys and his fleet! What impression did you get of his force?"

He listened with a sort of frowning inattention while Gaunt described what he had seen. The exact strength of his enemy, the count of his guns and of his transports, were irrelevant details. Where at that moment to find them was the supreme question.

"You should have hung on to them," he said, and his frown deepened. "I should then have got some hint of their course."

Here he broke off, and walked impatiently up and down his cabin.

"I was left to guess betwixt Naples and Sicily, betwixt Portugal and Ireland. To have known which way they turned their noses would have been worth

millions. But if they are above water," he went on grimly, "we'll find them."

He had forgotten Gaunt, and walked to and fro, flapping the stump of his right arm. Now and again he put his left hand to his heart. "My return to Syracuse in 1798," he wrote long afterwards, "broke my heart." It is certain that the strain of those terrible weeks affected him physically. Gaunt looked at the admiral—the haggard face, the aspect of command, the one gleaming eye—and a thrill ran through him. He was familiar with the iron face and bent shoulders of St. Vincent, with Mann's care-fretted brow and nervous lips. But here was a man of another order. There was something steel-bright and steel-hard, and of lightning swiftness about him; a gleam of the strange fire of genius, a look of power which acted like a spell on those about him. And Gaunt unconsciously felt the magic of that strange influence.

Nelson, for the moment, was apparently unconscious of Gaunt's presence. Before his mental vision gleamed the topsails of Brueys' fleet, with Bonaparte on board, and an army on a cruise.

Bonaparte was already famous. He had overthrown the armies and generals of Austria, and had overrun Italy; and Nelson, with the instinct of genius, divined that he was the embodiment and the protagonist of the Revolution. And now he was on Nelson's own realm! He had exchanged the battle-fields of Lodi, and Arcole, and Rivoli for the chances of the sea. He was within the reach of Nelson's

stroke—and yet escaped it! No wonder that Nelson's keen spirit fretted his weak body almost to the breaking-point.

Gaunt, meanwhile, had offered no apology nor defence; and his silence touched Nelson's kindlier feelings.

"Well, Gaunt," he said, "you carried that despatch-boat gallantly, and you hung on to Toulon when we were blown off. The *Hirondelle* must be a fine sea-boat. But if the *Vanguard* had been in her place, and I had seen the Frenchmen coming out, I would have hung on to their tail till Troubridge came up with the squadron. But chasing your enemy over the Mediterranean without a hint of his course is a trying business."

He dismissed Gaunt, with instructions to keep company with the squadron till his return despatches were sent on board. Gaunt jumped into his boat, which had hung on to the slowly moving *Vanguard*, and pushed off to the *Hirondelle*. Just before day-break a boat from the *Vanguard* brought him his despatches, and orders to bear up for Cadiz.

The sun was rising as the *Hirondelle* bore away from the fleet. Gaunt looked back at the two slowly-moving lines of the great ships, foreshortened in the distance. The nearest ships had a strange majesty of height and bulk, but the further ships were dwarfed. They were sailing due east, and the rising sun hung over their bowsprits. There was a curious and threatening gloom in the sky. Cliff-like masses of black clouds rose tier above tier from the sea-line

to the zenith. At one point the piled gloom was rent, and through it, as through some narrow aerial canyon, burned the red disc of the sun, scarcely clear of the water-line. The atmospheric conditions gave it the aspect of a setting rather than of a rising sun. A broad pathway of crimson light ran from the horizon to the high, bluff bows of Nelson's ships, and seemed to make a burning pathway for them. Against the red ball of the sun and that pathway of crimson light the ships showed black—hulls and sails alike were of an inky and menacing blackness.

The sight—he knew not why—strangely stirred Gaunt's imagination. It would have startled him yet more had he known that there hung before the bowsprits of those black, majestic ships—and only a few hours distant—the terrors and glories of a great battle. They were drifting along that pathway of crimson light to the midnight flames of the Nile!

CHAPTER XXV

A RICH FREIGHT

“Where the remote Bermudas ride,
In th’ ocean’s bosom.”

—ANDREW MARVEL.

FOR the *Hirondelle* many weeks of active but uneventful service followed, and Gaunt found, for the first time in his career, that his profession could be monotonous. He heard, far off, the echoes of the Nile, but for him they were only echoes. Great events took place, but they were beyond his horizon. The sea, even though its surface was sown with Frenchmen or Spaniards to be chased, and prizes to be captured, and adventures to be dared, Gaunt secretly felt was growing commonplace! He would have scorned that view, only a few months earlier, as a mere wicked heresy; but now the figure of Irene haunted him, and made everything else flavourless. He hungered for the magic of her eyes, and the music of her voice. The fear that he might lose her gnawed at his heart and drew lines on his face. She seemed as radiant as a star set in some far-off heaven—and as remote!

Love is always masterful; under some conditions it is an oppression; and Gaunt, beneath its yoke,

became, during these sad weeks, a mere fancy-haunted slave!

Late in November 1798 the *Hirondelle* was lying in Kingston, on the point of sailing with despatches; and Gaunt found he was to have one quite unexpected passenger. The Littons were long ago, he knew, safe back in London, but "Uncle Insects" had remained in Jamaica, absorbed in the new world of entomological life its soil and forests opened to him. An attack of fever had broken him down, he was ordered back to England, and the admiral in command of the station, an old and warm friend of the Littons, had promised him a passage in the first despatch-boat, and this was the *Hirondelle*!

Gaunt met "Uncle Insects" in the admiral's drawing-room. He looked older and greyer, and fever had sorely wasted him, but his eyes gleamed through his huge spectacles with all their ancient fire.

"I shall be glad to give you a cabin, Mr. Inskip," said Gaunt; "and young Litton will be pleasant company for you."

"I don't like being on an armed vessel. I may be supposed to have given my sanction to the un-intellectual and barbarous system it represents," "Uncle Insects" replied uncompromisingly. "But I must get into a colder climate at once, and your ship is the only one sailing just now."

Gaunt smiled at the unyielding, not to say ungracious speech, and the smile seemed to thaw "Uncle Insects" a little.

"Perhaps, Commander Gaunt," he said, "we may have the opportunity of discussing the whole question while I am on your ship, and I may be able to convince you——"

"If you can talk the jacket off Gaunt's back," broke in the admiral, with a laugh, "or persuade him that he ought not to interfere with a Frenchman sailing off with a prize under his lee, you are a very clever man, Mr. Inskip!"

"Uncle Insects" smiled philosophically.

"There is something against which the gods fight in vain," he said, and neither Gaunt nor the admiral was learned enough to feel the sting of the quotation.

"Uncle Insects," with his precious collections, came duly on board the next day. The *Hirondelle* was to sail at daybreak, but as evening was drawing on, Fraser reported that the signal for Gaunt was flying from the admiral's flagstaff.

"Well, Gaunt," said the admiral, when he reported himself, "you must lose no time with your despatches. But here's a bit of work you can do as you go, and something which will pay you well. A wealthy planter on the northern coast has turned his plantation into cash, and wants to send the specie home. He has been a jewel collector too, for years, and has, perhaps, £50,000 in rubies and diamonds. When his specie and jewels are put together they come to something like £120,000, and he wants to send the whole for security by a man-of-war to England. The *Hirondelle* is the only ship sailing for Europe at the present moment, and I suppose

you won't object to take charge of Mr. Friend's treasure?"

Gaunt certainly had no objection. The carriage of specie, jewels, &c., was one recognised and very rich source of profit to the commanders of frigates, despatch-boats, &c. The case was well known in the navy of the commander of one despatch-boat who cleared £10,000 in this way during his term of service of only three years. The captain of the *Sybilie*, while Gaunt served on board of her as second lieutenant, was paid £1500 for carrying a single parcel of diamonds from the Tagus to Spithead. A new rule entitled the admiral to a proportion of such freightage; and probably the circumstance that a percentage of the money earned would trickle into his own pockets, made the admiral eager to put the business in Gaunt's way. The rate usually paid for the carriage of treasure varied from 1 to 1½ per cent.; and after allowing for the admiral's share, Gaunt would gain from £1000 to £1250 by the present transaction.

The admiral went on, with a certain hesitation, to say—

"It's not quite the thing, Gaunt, to send you out of your direct course; but you must pick up this freight at a little bay west of Point Galina. Mr. Friend is afraid both to keep his treasure under his own roof and to send it here; and it's your old antagonist, Captain Giron, that keeps him in a panic."

Gaunt looked up in surprise. He knew Captain

Giron was afloat again, though not in command of a man-of-war. He was under a cloud, owing to the loss of the corvette; and the freedom and gains of a privateersman's life, after all, suited him better than the discipline of the French navy. He was now in command of a fast and heavily armed privateer brig, the *Bonnet Rouge*, and was harrying the British trade in West Indian waters. But how could Captain Giron disquiet a Jamaican planter under his own roof?

"Well," said the admiral, with a vexed expletive, "the scamp cruises in company with two other vessels, a very fast schooner, the *Actif*, and a brig, the *Torche*, nearly as formidable as the *Bonnet Rouge* herself. They have a nest somewhere to the west of the Inagua Islands—but exactly where is a secret; and the secret is well kept. . The only brig of war I have, the *Fox*, is looking after them now, but she is too heavy-footed for them. Captain Giron is the most audacious beggar that ever cruised in these waters. He is known to run at night into some of the many inlets on the northern coast, and to land. He has friends amongst the slaves on the plantations and the black fishermen of the coast; and Mr. Friend is persuaded that some night he will make a dash at his residence and carry off his treasure. A sum of money like that sets all mouths watering, and all fingers itching. The unfortunate owner is afraid to send it by sea to Kingston, lest it should be snapped up on the way; to send it across the hills, too, is risky. So I promised to send round a ship of war,

and pick it up in the little bay nearest to his plantation.”

This would take the *Hirondelle* out of her course ; it meant a delay of at least three or four days. But, as the admiral sanctioned it, Gaunt offered no objection. The admiral's orders would cover him. But that officer would certainly not have suggested the delay—and probably not have permitted it—but for the new rule which gave him a fat share of the rich freightage to be earned.

Gaunt made the little bay on the second day after leaving Kingston, and found it offered good anchorage. There was a tiny and ragged hamlet rambling down from the shade of the foliage to the curving white beach, with a population of mulattos and negroes, and a dozen or so fishermen's boats drawn up on the hot sand, or anchored in the shallow water. The plantation was on the hill-slopes, some fifteen miles distant.

Mr. Friend came promptly on board, and Gaunt found him a man of many anxieties, and of nervous temper.

“The story of my specie and jewels,” he complained, “has leaked out, and those — Frenchmen are hanging round the bay like wasps round a honey-pot. I suspect that they have spies in the hamlet. Some of the fishermen are certainly in league with them. The *Bonnet Rouge* has, more than once, been seen hovering off the bay, and there are whispers that Captain Giron has been on shore, — him !”

Gaunt listened to all this with a certain amused

incredulity. That a French privateer, on a shore so well patrolled as the coast of Jamaica, should run in under cover of night, and land some of its crew, seemed unlikely. Yet Captain Giron's audacity, Gaunt reflected, with half a laugh, made anything possible.

Mr. Friend, it was arranged, should bring off his precious freight the next day, and the *Hirondelle* would sail immediately it had been received. Gaunt went ashore with the planter, and noted that there were some sulky faces, and many sly ones, amongst the half-breeds of the hamlet. Yes! Captain Giron might well find useful agents amongst them.

The night passed by quietly, though once the watch challenged a drifting shadow that was suspected to be a boat; but it melted into the darkness without reply. The treasure was not expected till afternoon, and at midday Fraser and Litton went ashore.

"Don't go far," said Gaunt, who knew that the rich foliage and cool shade of the gullies would tempt Fraser up the hill slopes. "Be back by eight bells."

At four o'clock, however, there was no sign of either Fraser and Litton, or of Mr. Friend and his packages.

Night drew on; darkness began to steal up from the sea; faint points of light shone out in the hamlet. The peaks of the hills showed black against the dying light in the western sky. The treasure had not yet arrived; but Gaunt was less concerned

about that fact than for the strange delay in the return of Fraser and Litton. He was about to despatch a boat on shore in search of them, when the sound of voices and the rattle of oars showed that a party was coming off to the brig. It proved to be Mr. Friend with his treasure.

“How is it you are so late?” asked Gaunt.

The planter could hardly explain; a wheel had, at one point, come off the cart; at another point, while crossing a bridge, the cart had been clumsily driven into the creek. Mr. Friend plainly thought these delays were something more than accidents, and he darkly hinted that he could feel the touch of Captain Giron’s hand in them! Gaunt smiled incredulously at the suggestion; the planter was half crazy with dread of the audacious privateersman.

The packages were carried into his cabin, but before Gaunt could count and examine them, or give a receipt for them, a canoe pulled alongside the brig, and a mulatto climbed hurriedly on board with an excited message from the missing officers.

There had been trouble on the hills. The young officer, the mulatto explained, had been seriously injured, and the other could not leave him; the captain must come at once, and bring the doctor. The story was confused and unintelligible; but it sent a thrill of strange disquiet through Gaunt. Litton was injured, perhaps seriously!

“Had Lieutenant Fraser sent no written message?”

“No.”

That was strange. Gaunt cross-examined the mulatto, but his tale seemed clear. Litton had tried to climb down the face of a cliff—Gaunt knew he had a monkey's joy in such feats—and had fallen. The other officer had clambered down to him, but could not carry him to the summit. He thought he was dying. The captain must come at once with seamen and ropes.

The stir and excitement of the moment seemed to call "Uncle Insects" out of that realm of scientific dreams in which he usually rambled. Gaunt stood at the break of the poop while he questioned the messenger, and the entomologist hovered round with head on one side, and an air of perplexed concern. He now broke suddenly into the cross-examination. His moon-like glasses overawed the mulatto, who seemed to regard them as charged with magical properties; and Gaunt was struck with the masterful tone "Uncle Insects" adopted, and the shrewdness of his questions. But he did not shake the man's tale; and Gaunt hesitated no longer.

He knew he ought not to leave the brig—especially in the absence of the first lieutenant, and with so much treasure on board; but in such an emergency some risk must be run. He could not refuse that appeal for help. He hurriedly explained all this to Mr. Friend while a boat was being lowered; and, leaving that gentleman still remonstrating loudly at the neglect of his affairs, jumped into it. Some blocks and ropes had been cast into the head of the boat, and the doctor sat beside Gaunt in the stern-sheets.

Just as the boat was pushing off "Uncle Insects" clambered down the brig's side, and peremptorily claimed a place in it. Gaunt hesitated. He must push on at speed, and the climb in the darkness up the steep hill-side track would tax the strength of the most active. At bottom, too, he looked on the entomologist as eccentric to the point of lunacy, and it seemed folly to burden himself, at such a moment, with a crank. But while Gaunt hesitated, Mr. Inskip's long legs had stridden over the side of the boat.

"Do you think," he said rebukingly, as he sank down into the stern-sheets, "I would let you go in search of the boy—my sister's son—without me? I know the hill-paths of Jamaica better than you can, and your seagoing legs will grow tired before mine."

There was a note of cool sense, as well as resolution, in "Uncle Insects'" speech which left Gaunt without reply, and which, indeed, made him look at the eccentric entomologist with a new respect, not unflavoured with surprise.

The boat pulled fast to the shore, and as the men bent to the oars, Gaunt found time to ask himself, ruefully, how could he face Irene if anything happened to Litton! He was still meditating anxiously on this problem when the boat grounded and the party leaped ashore.

The mulatto led the way beyond the hamlet, by a narrow track that left the seaside and ran up amongst the hills, through deep and narrow glens.

The blackness was intense. They stumbled over roots of trees and rough stones; they tore their skin and clothes on the spikes of unseen plants. The path now plunged into deep ravines, now lost itself in the dense gloom of a sloping forest.

The air was close and heavy with the night-scents of a hundred tropical plants; but Gaunt pushed on at speed. The long legs of "Uncle Insects" kept him up with the foremost, and he seemed to borrow a touch of the night-vision of an owl from his moon-shaped glasses.

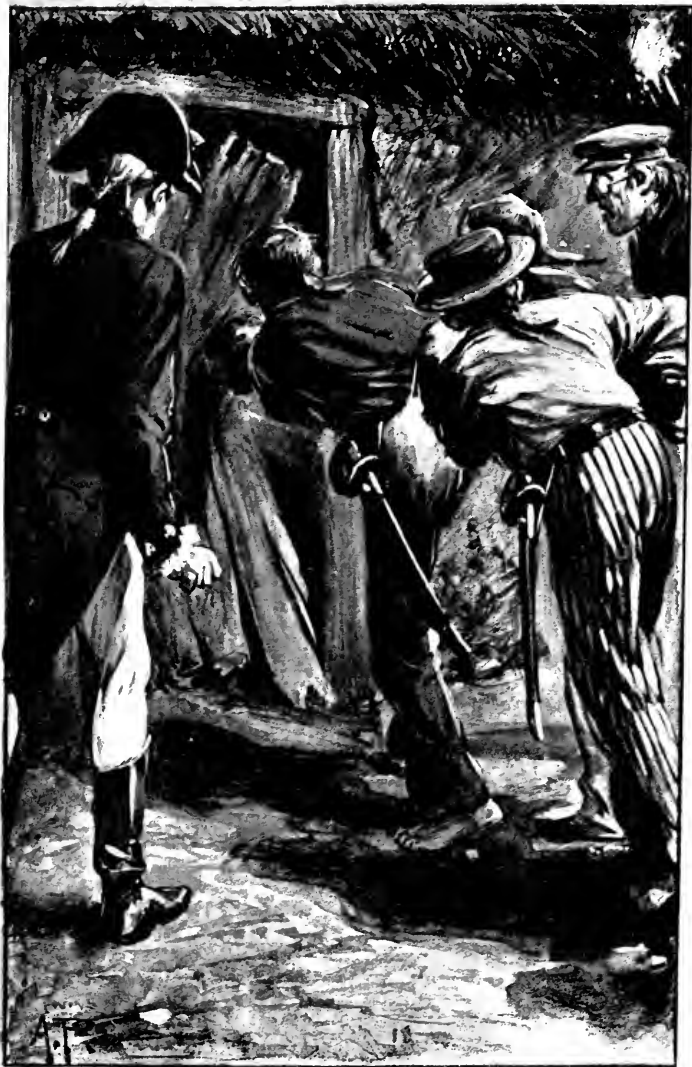
At last, long past midnight, a few dim points of light showed that a hamlet was before them; they had reached their destination. At the noise of their approach a negro ran out to meet them.

"The prisoners," he cried, "were trying to break out!"

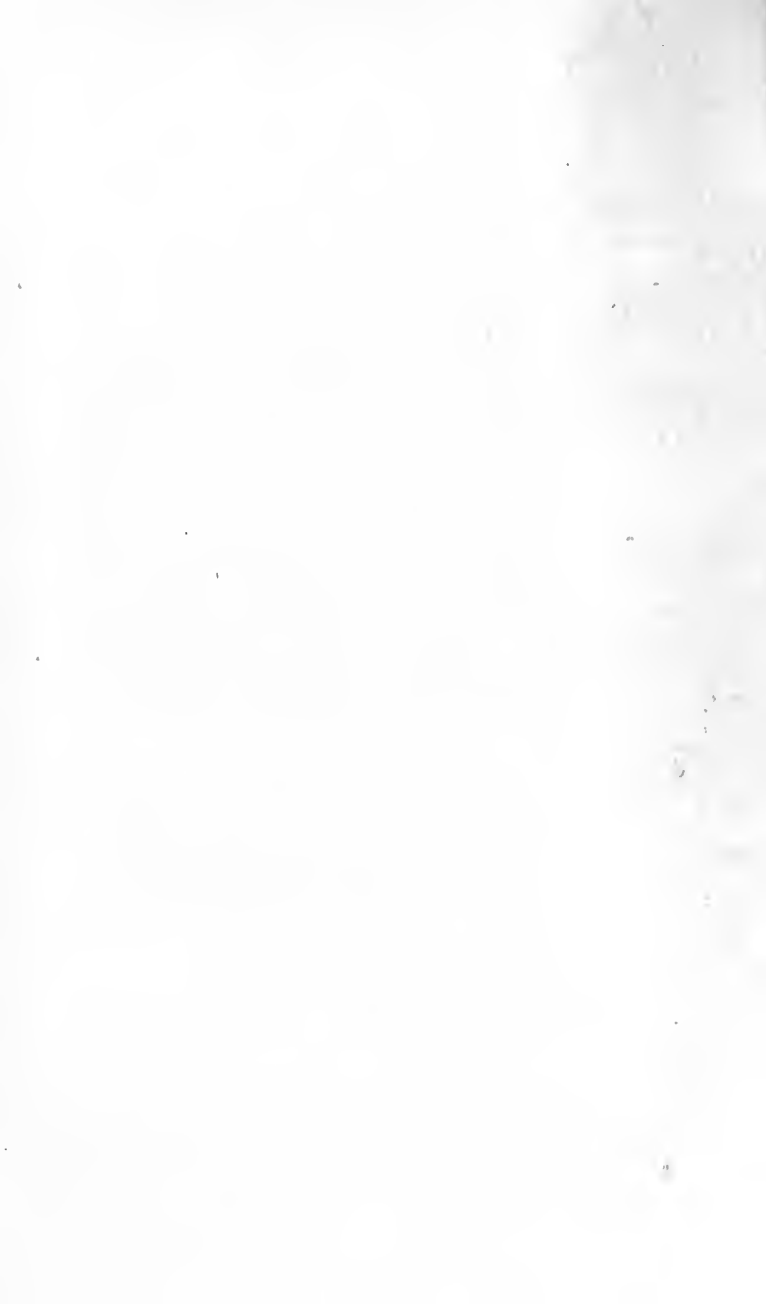
Gaunt heard that word "prisoners" with amazement. The party ran forward to a low-roofed hut, from within which came a sound of shouts, and of a soft but vigorous thumping, as of feet—shoeless feet—battering at a door. Gaunt was bewildered, but began to suspect the truth.

"Pick up that log of wood, lads," he said briefly, to a couple of seamen; "now charge with it at the door."

The seamen picked up the log, and turning it into a battering-ram, ran at the door. It burst open with the shock, and two ragged figures stepped into the light of the torches. They were Fraser and Litton—bare-footed, bare-headed, and half-naked!



"IT BURST OPEN WITH THE SHOCK"



Their tale was curious. They had been suddenly captured by a party of a dozen negroes, directed by a couple of white men, whom both Fraser and Litton declared to be French seamen—though how French seamen could be wandering in a forest in Jamaica was not clear. They had been hurried up into the hills, stripped of their uniform, and thrown into the hut with their hands and feet tied. With great difficulty, and after the lapse of some hours, they had released themselves, and were trying to break out when Gaunt arrived.

Gaunt sternly questioned their guide, who, to his surprise, had made no attempt to escape. With widely-grinning features, indeed, he seemed to regard himself as their benefactor, and entitled to some shining reward.

His story was simple, and its very simplicity made it credible. He had been called from his hut by one of the Frenchmen, and sent down to the brig with the message he had delivered, and which he had been made to repeat over and over again till he was perfect in it. He had been given some silver coins before starting on his errand to the *Hirondelle*, and was promised a reward twice as great when he had brought the captain of the English man-of-war up to the hamlet.

“The business is clear enough,” said Gaunt at last, to Fraser. “The whole affair is a trick to lure me away from the brig to-night, and it has succeeded. You are away, too. Though what they can do with the brig is not clear. It’s not at all probable that

any enemy's ship outside is watching her to make a dash at her. Woods is in charge; and though he is a sleepy-headed fellow, he will fight like a bulldog if attacked. Those Frenchmen in the party that captured you make a queer feature in the whole business. Perhaps there was more in what the planter told us than we imagined. The privateers are likely enough to have heard of his diamonds and gold, and to attempt some trick to get them. And, by Jove! that's the key to the business. Friend brought his packages on board the brig just as I started; he believed he was delayed by tricks on the road. There may have been some scheme for intercepting them before they reached the *Hirondelle*; but, if so, they failed, and they can hardly dream of carrying them off after they have been put on board. It would be a mad thing to attempt to carry treasure off from an English brig of war lying in a British port. But if Captain Giron is in this business, he has audacity enough for anything. I shall be anxious till we get back to the brig, and that won't be till morning."

Gaunt left unspoken the reflection, which ran through him like the thrust of a sword, that if anything had gone wrong with the brig during his absence, it would be his professional ruin. Fraser remembered this, too; and both officers pushed on through the darkness, on their return to the brig, with the utmost energy, in spite of tired limbs, and thirsty throats, and a blackness which made each step an uncertainty. "Uncle Insects," meanwhile,

had taken possession of Litton, and that active but very fatigued young gentleman found himself, to his own surprise, hanging helplessly on his uncle's arm, and dragged forward with amazing energy by his uncle's long and tireless legs. The entomologist, it seemed, could outwalk the middy!

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LOST TREASURE

“Morning?”

It seems to me a night with a sun added.”

—BROWNING.

DAY had long broken before the little party sighted the bay. The brig lay peacefully at anchor, with no sign of mischief or disquiet about her; but one glance, as Gaunt stepped on board, told him that something was wrong. The tidings were written in expressive characters on the face of the officer in charge.

“Well, Mr. Woods, what is it?”

“The brig has been boarded, sir, in the night.”

“Boarded!”

“Yes, sir, and your cabin has been plundered.”

Gaunt's face went suddenly white. His worst fears were realised; the treasure was gone! And yet some dim instinct had warned him that this was behind the mystery of the assault on Fraser and Litton, and the lying message which had taken him to the hills.

He went straight to his cabin, without asking further questions. The signs of plunder were evident.

The drawers were open, his desk had been forced, and not merely the treasure, but his despatches had vanished. Gaunt's face was stern; but his sea-training had taught him self-control in any moment of crisis. He was ice-cool, and his voice was even quieter than usual. He listened almost without comment to the tale of the officer in charge, only breaking in at intervals with some brief, keen question.

The night had been, as Gaunt knew, moonless, and the blackness was made yet more dense by a fog which had drifted in from the sea. The usual watch had been set; but, as Gaunt found, on putting a brief question, there had been no sentry on the deck aft. No sound of a boat had been heard till about four o'clock, when the faint splash of oars caught the attention of the watch; but the sound had died away seaward.

"That," Gaunt said to himself, "was the boat going off after the theft had been effected."

Later inquiry amongst the crew showed that a sound as of oars had been heard earlier betwixt the brig and the hamlet; but it was so faint, and died away so completely, that it had not been reported. There was hardly any reason, indeed, why it should attract attention. A boat moving along the shore, in a British port, was no reason for alarm.

"Had any lights been seen?" Gaunt asked.

"None;" but here, again, inquiry showed that a light had, some time after midnight, burned for a

moment from the shore, and another had apparently answered it from the head of the inlet.

These, it was now plain, were signal lights.

No sound had been heard in Gaunt's cabin, and no lights seen there. Gaunt had closed and locked his cabin door before starting for the hills; the first alarm was given only a short time before the return of the party, by the discovery that the door was unlocked.

Gaunt's shrewd brain and quick eyes soon disentangled the mystery. He saw Captain Giron's adroit hand and plotting genius in it. The Frenchman, it was clear, had been on the track of Mr. Friend's diamonds and specie, and would probably have made a midnight dash on the plantation to secure it. But the arrival of the *Hirondelle* created a new situation; and the Frenchman, with amazing swiftness and skill, had plainly changed his plan to meet the new conditions.

Gaunt had been tempted on shore by the tale of Litton's accident; then, under the screen of the two-fold darkness—of night and of fog—a canoe had stolen under the quarter of the brig, and an entrance into Gaunt's cabin had been effected, in what manner Gaunt could not, at first, determine. Yet a little thought and examination made it clear.

As Gaunt guessed, the attempt had been made about three o'clock. The watch was careless and sleepy; the main cabin, used as a gunroom, was empty, and dimly lit. The stern-light of this cabin was square-shaped and large—large enough for a

man to creep through. The dead-light was lifted, and the window itself had been left open for coolness. If the brig could be approached without discovery, it was quite possible for an active man to clamber from the canoe up to the stern window of the gunroom, and to get through it. Gaunt found it possible—even while filled with dismay at the disaster which had overtaken him—to admire the silence, coolness, and daring with which the scheme had been carried into effect.

Once in the dim and empty gunroom, Gaunt's cabin was easily discovered; the lock had been picked—plainly by some adroit hand, accustomed to such feats, for it was not injured—and the cabin had been plundered. The packages of specie, and the heavy, brass-bound case of jewels had been lowered down through the porthole, and the canoe, with its prize, had vanished silently in the darkness. The *Bonnet Rouge* was, no doubt, lying outside the inlet, and, when it had picked up the boat, it had run off before the wind, and was by this time far out to sea.

The whole plan was audacious in the highest degree; but Gaunt saw that it was perfectly feasible. Granted a dark night, the brig at anchor with a sleepy anchor watch, and Fraser and himself out of the ship, and the business was not only practicable, but simple. Yet an amazingly clever, or an astonishingly lucky, adjustment of time and incident was necessary to ensure success. The treasure must come on board late; Gaunt

must be tempted ashore; the brig must lie, in the long darkness of the night, with more than half its officers missing. This made it possible to reach the brig undiscovered, and carry off the treasure without giving any alarm. Then the *Bonnet Rouge* must lie undetected outside the harbour, to carry off the plunder; and all this had happened without a single hitch! Captain Giron was a lucky man!

Gaunt had, as yet, hardly allowed himself to consider how the incident would affect his own fortunes. He knew it meant ruin. To have treasure and despatches stolen from a brig of war lying in a British port was sufficient to make its commander the jest of the navy. The tale would be told in every gunroom and forecastle from Portsmouth to Halifax, from Spithead to Toulon, and always with Homeric laughter. And the only excuse Gaunt could offer—his own absence from the ship, and that of his lieutenant—was itself a professional offence, for which he might well have to pay the penalty of a court-martial.

As Gaunt sat quietly in his cabin, thinking out the situation, he saw all this with one swift, sure glance. As a result, Irene was further from him than ever. She was now, indeed, as unattainable as a star! He could not ask her to share a disgraced life.

Then it suddenly dawned on Gaunt that the plunder of the treasure was only another incident in the long duel with Captain Giron. That dangerous foe had robbed him of the prize under his

command, and so had injured his reputation; he had taken prisoner the girl he loved; and now he had ruined his fortunes and destroyed his professional career. But the duel, as he looked back upon it, was a curious tale of stroke and counterstroke. If he had lost the *Hirondelle*, he had retaken her. He had repaid the capture of the *Cardiff Castle* by cutting out *La Mulette*. He had rescued the girl he loved, driving Captain Giron, a wounded and discredited man, ashore.

What remained as an answer to this last stroke? He must retake the treasure and despatches, and must capture their captors! Gaunt's lips shut like iron; his hands suddenly clenched themselves; his brow was knit with resolute purpose as he made that resolve. Yet the *Bonnet Rouge* had vanished into mere space; and on what course—north, east, or west—he could not guess. The Frenchman, too, was known to cruise in company with two other privateers; and all three, no doubt, shared in the present venture, and would join their forces against pursuit.

But Gaunt bent his intelligence and will to the problem. Somehow, the task must be accomplished. Everything a man most prizes—his honour, his fortune, his love—hung on it. And, had Captain Giron seen the look of power, and of eager purpose, on Gaunt's brow, as he sat in his cabin, he might have felt his newly-won treasure was not yet quite safe.

At this moment Gaunt was called on deck;

Mr. Friend had pulled out to the brig in a high state of alarm, for a rumour of the loss of the treasure had reached him. His face, when Gaunt met him, was white; his hands shook like those of a paralytic; he could hardly speak.

"It's not true, Captain Gaunt——" he succeeded in saying at last, and then stopped, well-nigh choked with agitation.

Gaunt looked at him steadily. "Yes, Mr. Friend; unhappily it is true. I was called away from the brig by a trick, and, somewhere before daybreak, the specie was carried off, I have no doubt by a boat from the privateer you reported to have been seen off the bay."

Mr. Friend stared at Gaunt with eyes that almost started out of his head. Speech for the moment failed him. He wore a look so ghastly that Gaunt put out his hand to prevent him from falling.

"It's gone!" he gasped at last, in broken tones.

"Yes."

Then a flash of wild suspicion leaped into his eyes.

"£125,000 stolen from His Majesty's brig," he cried, in broken accents of passion, "while its commander was ashore! Is not that tale a little queer? Who will believe it?" he cried suddenly, at the top of his voice.

"You will, Mr. Friend," said Gaunt sternly.

Yet it chilled him, in spite of himself, to find that this view of the story was possible. He might himself be regarded as the thief; or, at least, as the thief's accomplice!

“But I hold your receipt—” Mr. Friend was going on to say, when he stopped suddenly, with his mouth working, and his face a more deathly white than ever.

“You have not got my receipt, Mr. Friend! I left the brig, as you know, without signing it.”

“But you had the gold! There are witnesses,” cried the unfortunate planter, with almost lunatic vehemence.

“You have no receipt; I had not taken charge of it.”

And at that moment Gaunt was tempted to accept this way of escape from his responsibility. Why should he not? It was literally true that he had signed no acknowledgment for the planter's gold and jewels; he had not examined them or taken formal charge of them. And the man was attacking his character; he deserved no consideration. The impulse—bred partly of anger and partly of self-regard—was almost too strong for Gaunt. His conscience for the moment was blinded.

There is a moral flaw in the strongest, and the sudden strain of temptation finds it out. This was what happened to Gaunt at that juncture. “Why should he not?” some inner voice seemed insistently whispering. At last his better nature asserted itself.

“Yes,” he said, “I had the gold; and, though it is gone, I will sign the receipt still, for I am morally responsible for it. I don't know the effect of my receipt, whether it makes the Admiralty liable, or leaves the responsibility on me. But, for whatever

it is worth, you shall have it. Do you think," said Gaunt, with a flash of mingled weariness and scorn, "I would try to shelter myself behind a quibble?"

And yet, as he reflected afterwards, with a prick of shame, he had almost yielded to the temptation to do that very thing! So mixed and tangled is the web of human character!

"It is a misfortune," Gaunt went on with energy—"almost the worst of misfortunes; and, if I lose my good name, and my career, to say nothing"—and here he stopped abruptly—"I am a worse loser than you; a thousand times over. But, Mr. Friend, the business is not ended yet. As I calculate, the Frenchman got the treasure away about four o'clock—that is not quite six hours since; and if so, he is within fifty miles of us. In a few minutes I shall be in pursuit. You can hear the anchor being weighed now. If you are a man that believes in prayer, ask God to help me, as I do every minute. For"—he went on with a touch of passion—"my life will be spoiled, and my happiness wrecked, unless I repair this mischief, and recover both treasure and despatches."

Mr. Friend stared. Gaunt's energy cooled his alarm. And this was, for him, a seaman of a strange type! There was that in his face and eyes which spoke of daring and of intelligence; and yet he talked of prayer as if that counted for more than luck or seamanship. And perhaps it did!

Here Litton came in to say that he had brought

off three fishermen most likely to give intelligence, and Gaunt left the bewildered planter abruptly.

He was persuaded that the fishermen of the hamlet must have a pretty clear knowledge of the hunting-ground and the rendezvous of the privateers, and he was determined, by some art, to extract that knowledge from them; and his first act had been to send a boat ashore to bring on board the owners of the principal fishing boats.

Gaunt examined them separately, putting his shrewdest wit to the task of extracting from each fisherman's brain all the information it held about the privateers. His inquiries proved almost unexpectedly successful. His keen, masterful gaze half fascinated the fishermen. They might have been sullenly obstinate against threats; they would probably have repaid gold with smooth lies; but, as one of the fishermen said afterwards, "His eyes frightened me!" Gaunt's stern, fixed looks half mesmerised the men. Each man, in turn, stammered, contradicted himself, and ended by telling all he knew; and the reports, when compared, roughly agreed. The rendezvous of the privateers lay somewhere to the west of the northern entrance to the Windward Passage, and in some of the islets to the southern extremity of what is known as the Crooked Passage. They cruised, for the most part, east of the Windward Passage itself.

Gaunt, with a map spread out before him, studied the whole problem, and, bit by bit, it grew clear to him. The Jumentos Group, a string of islets, formed

the blunted apex of a triangle, from which ran two diverging channels, to the S.E. and the N.E. respectively. One, the Crooked Passage, gave a course to the open sea, the other made a sea-lane to the southern head of the Windward Passage. The rendezvous of the privateers was somewhere off the point where those two channels met. They would meet at the rendezvous to concert plans and exchange intelligence, and then run out, either by the north-east or the south-east passage, to their hunting-ground, and they could fall back by these again to their meeting-point, with their prizes, or for shelter and concealment if the British cruisers were too active.

The *Hirondelle* was already running out of the bay, for no time was to be lost, and the general course was clear. The privateers, Gaunt assumed, would make back to their common rendezvous, and the course to it lay, certainly, through the Windward Passage.

One other question Gaunt debated in his own thoughts, and then dismissed. Ought he to run back to Kingston to report his disaster, and obtain duplicate despatches? But this would mean the loss of at least four days. The admiral, indeed, when he heard the story, might dismiss him from the brig, or, at least, suspend him, with a view to a court-martial. Gaunt settled the matter by putting in the hands of Mr. Friend—who had recovered some measure of self-control, and who undertook to forward it without delay—a letter to the admiral,

reporting the whole incident. Then, dismissing every other concern, he bent his utmost wit and energy to the single task before him; how to overtake the *Bonnet Rouge*; or, if he could not overtake her, how to track her to the rendezvous of the privateers. He had no doubt that the three vessels would meet there, to divide the great prize they had won.

The resolve to recover the lost treasure and despatches glowed like some flame in Gaunt's very blood. And, almost to his own wonder, he was conscious of a deep, though wordless and unreasoning conviction, that he would accomplish this. His life was not to be ruined! The long duel with the Frenchman would end in his favour, though how, or when, he could not guess.

"Uncle Insects" met him as he left his cabin.

"This is very sad, and most improper on the part of Captain Giron," he said, in the tone of a moralist sighing over human infirmity.

"Yes," replied Gaunt. "I am sure you don't approve of a performance of this sort, especially at our cost."

"No," said "Uncle Insects," with an air of regretful concession. "My conversations with Captain Giron, while on his ship, led me to hope better things of him."

"I suspect he looks on this as a particularly good thing—and small blame to him!"

"I think you hardly understand Captain Giron," said "Uncle Insects," in an austere tone. "You don't do justice to him."

"I only wish I had the chance," replied Gaunt, with a grim smile, which the entomologist contemplated with suspicion. "Some day I hope I shall."

"Any influence I was establishing over him," said "Uncle Insects" severely, "you destroyed by your rash attack on the corvette."

"But you owe your liberty to that, and so do Miss Litton and Sir John."

"Yes, yes; so far, the results were no doubt good. But, none the less, you arrested the moral development of Captain Giron; and this, I fear, is the result of it."

"I hope to arrest his 'moral development' a little more effectively within the next few days, if I've decent luck."

"Well, Commander Gaunt, we'll not discuss the matter further; but I thought it might relieve your mind to know that I disapprove of the conduct of these Frenchmen;" and, with a look of benevolent concession, "Uncle Insects" moved away to his cabin.

"Thank you, sir," said Gaunt; "but I suppose," he added cruelly, "you won't help to work a gun if we fall in with the privateers?"

"My principles hardly deserve your satire," Commander Gaunt," replied the entomologist, with great dignity. "I shall choose my own way of expressing my disapproval of Captain Giron's proceedings," and "Uncle Insects" walked away, chin in air, and with an offended look.

“‘Uncle Insects’ is improving,” reflected Gaunt. “I may yet see him expressing his ‘disapproval’ of Captain Giron with the help of a cutlass;” and, with a smile lighting up, for a moment, his anxious face, Gaunt went on deck.

CHAPTER XXVII

NEWS

“Some unsuspected isle in the far seas!
Some unsuspected isle in far-off seas!”

—BROWNING.

GAUNT had already a rough plan of operations in his mind. The three French privateers, he knew, hunted in common, dividing their booty. This plan was often adopted, even amongst British cruisers in West Indian waters. The ships along a hundred miles of coast would act on common plans, distributing the cruising-ground amongst themselves, joining their forces occasionally for some common adventure, and pooling their prizes.

The Frenchmen copied that method, and cruised in groups; but in one respect they differed from the British captains. They profoundly distrusted each other! And, with such a prize as that which had now been carried off, they would keep together till they reached their rendezvous, and would then—probably with furious and bloody quarrels—divide their booty.

Gaunt knew, in a general way, the position of their rendezvous, and he was sure that there—or

thereabouts—all three would be found in company. His business was to run through the Windward Passage under all canvas, and then make on a north-west course for what was known as the Jumentos Keys, near which the privateers' meeting-place must certainly be. He might, indeed, pick up the Frenchmen on the road. He must trust to the chapter of accidents; or, as in his wiser and deeper thoughts he framed it, the "chapter of accidents" was only a phrase which covered something that had no relation to chance. He did not put the thought into words—it would have seemed to others mere fanaticism or superstition—but Gaunt, with the simplicity of a seaman's faith, had the sense that a Divine Hand was steering his ship!

The *Hirondelle* had just cleared the Windward Passage, and her head had fallen off to the north-west, when the look-out hailed the deck, and reported a sail to the north. The stranger was running on an easterly course, and the *Hirondelle* had only to fall off a few points to intercept her. There were quick eyes, however, on the strange ship. The low hull, the tall, raking masts of the brig, its immense spread of canvas, all told she was built for chase and battle. She was viewed at once with alarmed suspicion; the change in her course was instantly detected; and, spreading every inch of canvas, the chase ran fast before the south-west breeze.

Under ordinary conditions Gaunt would have been

eager for pursuit. That silver patch of leaning top-sails might well represent an enemy; and an enemy meant a stirring adventure, and, perhaps, a fat prize. But chasing her just now took him off the track of the privateers, and meant what might prove to be a fatal loss of time. Yet it was clearly his duty—his Duty, spelt with a big "D"!—to bring the stranger to, and, with a pang of angry regret, Gaunt gave the order to chase.

The breeze suited the *Hirondelle*, with its light draught and soaring heights of canvas, and by twelve o'clock the stranger, a smart and handsome barque—evidently a Spaniard—was within gunshot. She was well armed, but the sound of the deep-voiced 32-pounder from the brig's midships was too menacing for Spanish nerves; and as the smoke of the shot rolled over the sea, the chase hove up into the wind, and the flag of Spain crept, as if reluctantly, to her peak, and then fluttered, with sullen slowness, down again.

Fraser in the longboat, with a strong crew, boarded her. She was the *Divina Provvidenzia*, an armed Spanish merchant-ship, built on fine lines, and evidently a traveller. Trusting in her speed and armament, her captain had dared the perils of pursuit and capture. He believed that he could outsail or outfight any ordinary privateer; he had not calculated on the ill-luck which, so early in his voyage, brought him within reach of a brig so fast and so formidable as the *Hirondelle*.

Fraser proceeded in the usual fashion to examine



"BOARDED HER"



the ship's papers—her clearance and bill of lading, &c.; and his eyes flashed as he ran down the items. Here were hides, indigo, cochineal, logwood—a prize of the richest sort. The Spanish captain, evidently a philosopher, had partially recovered from the exasperation of capture, and by this time was anxious to bespeak, for purposes of his own, the goodwill of his captors. He proceeded to give Fraser a bit of surprising information.

“The best part of the cargo,” he said, “is not in that list. It is under my cabin floor.”

Fraser stared, and began to ask particulars. The Spaniard rose, and leading the way to his cabin, pointed out a small square hatch in the floor, locked and sealed. The keys were given up; Fraser called in a couple of his seamen, the hatch was lifted, and in a sort of well lined with iron was a pile of strong wooden cases.

“There are 300,000 dollars there,” said the Spaniard, with half a groan. “They are the bankers’ loss, thank God! not mine,” he added philosophically.

He had clambered with Fraser down into the well; he now put his foot on a small case of rich wood, strongly clamped with brass, lying apart.

“But this,” he said, “is mine. The English will not rob me of my private venture?”

“No,” said Fraser, “if it is yours. But,” he asked, with Scottish caution, “what does it contain?”

The Spaniard hesitated a moment, then replied—
“Jewels.”

“And how does the captain of a merchantman

happen to be the owner of a case of jewels of this size? I must take it, with the dollars, on board the *Hirondelle*, and you will have the chance of proving it to be private property later."

The Spaniard muttered a deep execration. It was a cheap service on his part to report the presence of the dollars. They were certain to be quickly discovered; in any case they were not his, and their capture left him no poorer. But he hoped to have carried off the jewels as his private booty; and Fraser's keenness detected the trick.

Fraser pulled to the *Hirondelle*, and his face, as he stepped on deck, told very expressively a story of good fortune.

"Well, Fraser," said Gaunt impatiently, "what is it?"

"A rich prize, sir; the richest prize any British ship has taken this year!"

"Yes!"

"There's cochineal, hides, logwood, and"—pausing for a moment, to make the announcement more dramatic—"a room full of dollars!" and Fraser—the Scotchman in him emerging triumphantly—smiled all over his face at such a piece of good news—"a room full of dollars!" he repeated.

Then he looked curiously, and with a sense of astonished disappointment, at his commanding officer. Gaunt took this tale of amazing luck with unsmiling eyes; almost, indeed, with a frowning brow. It would make him rich; it would fill the pockets of every man on board. It was as though

a miraculous shower of golden coin—or of silver doubloons, at least—had fallen out of space on the deck of the *Hirondelle*. The glittering coins were choking its lee scuppers, and every man on board might dip his hands in them. And yet Gaunt, who would profit most by the capture, had not a smile to expend upon it!

“Yes, yes, Fraser,” he said, smiling at his lieutenant’s disappointed look. “I am glad for your sake, and for mine. I am glad,” he went on heartily, “for the sake of the lads. But a thousand fat prizes won’t console me unless I can come up with Captain Giron, and get back my despatches, and poor Friend’s specie. They represent my professional honour.”

By this time the news had run through the whole brig; Johnson and Peters were shaking hands energetically amidships; half-a-dozen seamen were furtively executing a hornpipe of joy under the shelter of the boats; every Jack on board was already slapping the imaginary doubloons in his pocket.

Gaunt, however, wasted no time in idle exultation. Time just then was, for him, more precious than even golden doubloons! The cases of specie were quickly transferred to the *Hirondelle*, with the box of jewels; a prize crew was put on board of the *Divina Provvidenzia*, and she was sent, in charge of a master’s mate, to Kingston, the Spanish officers being brought on board the brig; and the *Hirondelle*, lying over before the fast-rising wind, was soon beating on a course towards the Jumentos Keys.

Gaunt had now more treasure on board the *Hirondelle* than she had ever before carried; but he had lost more than half a day, and his force was weakened by the prize crew in charge of the Spaniard. So intent was Gaunt on the business of overtaking the privateers that he almost regretted the capture of even so rich a prize at such a cost! It made less probable the one success that could give him back his imperilled career, and the hope that was almost more precious than even his career.

But, as it turned out, he was to be rewarded for his loyalty to duty with some intelligence which, at the moment, and to his anxious and burdened mind, was worth more than gold. The captured Spaniard had run down the Old Bahama Passage, along the coast of Cuba, and was bearing across the northern entrance to the Windward Passage, when sighted by the *Hirondelle*. She must, therefore, have run athwart the course towards the rendezvous, which, on Gaunt's theory, the Frenchmen were taking.

Keen cross-examination brought out the fact that on the previous day, when off Point Moa, a brig and a schooner were sighted. They were on a north-north-west course, and were plainly French privateers. France and Spain were allies; but the interval between privateers and pirates, in those waters, and at that period, was of so faint and vanishing a character, that the *Divina Provvidenzia* had kept as far from the strange sails as possible. It was keeping to the south to avoid them, indeed, that threw the unfortunate Spaniard so perilously near

the entrance to the Windward Passage, and so made her the prize of the *Hirondelle*.

The Spanish captain swore long and loudly at the two French ships as the cause of his ruin, while he related the story to Gaunt. If he could give any intelligence to their injury it would be a sweet morsel to him.

The French privateers had changed their course to cut off the *Divina Providenzia*, but after a couple of hours' chase had abandoned the attempt to overtake her. This intelligence enabled Gaunt to place the Frenchmen with something like precision. A little over eighteen hours earlier they had been south of the Great Inagua. The *Hirondelle*, at the moment Gaunt learned this, was near the northern extremity of that island, and by running through the channel betwixt the two Inaguas he could either intercept the privateers before they reached the Crooked Passage, or could drive them on the Jumentos group.

But the Spaniard had seen only two privateers; and, for a time, this puzzled Gaunt. Where was the third Frenchman, the missing brig? That the three privateers hunted in partnership was certain. If two had been detailed for the attempt on Mr. Friend's specie and jewels, the third would still have a title to a share of the booty; and Gaunt was sure that no division would be made before the three vessels met; and they would meet as soon as possible after the adventure had been brought off.

Gaunt concluded that the third privateer was

cruising on its old ground in the open waters to the north of the Bahamas, and at an agreed date would run back through Crooked Passage to the rendezvous. The Frenchmen at that moment would thus be travelling along different but converging courses to a common point; and Gaunt knew roughly where that point was. His faculty for clearly thinking out a problem, and so guessing his enemy's tactics, served him well, as did his habit of mental certainty about the conclusions thus reached. He had only to prolong, on his chart, the lines on which he calculated the privateers at that moment were moving, to find their meeting-point; and as he studied the chart, he saw that, by running betwixt the two Inaguas, he could reach that point as soon as the privateers themselves, or even sooner.

Gaunt's hand clenched involuntarily as his eyes dwelt on the chart. His enemies, little as they dreamed it, were almost in his grasp! They were at least within striking distance! That their force was more than double his own gave him no concern. He had faith in his brig, and in his men; and with a thrill of exultation stirring in all his veins, he laid the course of the *Hirondelle* to the north-east point of the Great Inagua. The meeting with his enemies could not be far off; every plunge of the nimble *Hirondelle* brought it nearer!

CHAPTER XXVIII

ONE AGAINST THREE

“But the tender fog shut fold on fold to hide the wrong they did.
The weeping fog rolled fold on fold the wrath of man to cloak.”

—KIPLING.

IT was the second morning after the capture of the *Divina Providenzia*; the hour was that darkest one in the whole circle of the twenty-four which comes before daybreak, and the darkness was made almost sensible to the touch by a sea-fog, which was drifting over the waters. The *Hirondelle* was running under easy sail, and the sharpest eyes on the brig were on the look-out. Gaunt knew that he was in perilous waters, sown thick with mud-banks and the teethlike edges of reefs. He had run past the southern extremity of Crooked Island, and must soon be off the southern entrance to Crooked Passage. The drama was moving swiftly to its climax; success or failure lay within the next few hours. If he did not intercept the privateers before another night fell, all his calculations were mistaken.

And now the moist, warm, blinding fog lay on the sea, shrouding everything. It was black with a worse than Egyptian blackness.

But daybreak was near. To the east the fog was

beginning to grow semi-luminous. Gaunt was on deck. He allowed no bell to be struck; no light gleamed; silence was sternly enforced fore and aft. He had a look-out at each masthead, with two on the brig's forecastle; but the orders were not to hail the deck in case of anything being sighted, but to run aft and report. For Gaunt would take no risks. He acted as if he knew that his enemies were drifting in the fog within a hundred yards of the *Hirondelle*.

Presently a few stars, chill and white, could be seen overhead. To the east the drifting vapour was clearing. It still lay on the face of the sea, black and dense, to the west; yet its opaque gloom was rent, every now and again, by long, vast gaps. And sometimes the luminous haze kindling in the east would faintly light up one of these deep aerial canyons.

Litton was perched in the rigging, watching intently; when, down one of the sudden rifts in the fog, he caught, with the quick eye of youth, a patch of more solid blackness, with outlines too firm to be a mere whirl of vapour. He ran silently aft, and eagerly reported his discovery to Gaunt. Gaunt came to the side of the ship, and stared intently in the direction Litton pointed out; but for some moments in vain, and Litton grew uneasy lest he should be laughed at for giving a false alarm.

But Gaunt was too wise to jest at the lad's eagerness, and stood, with patient vigilance, watching. Presently there came another fissure in the slowly-drifting fog, and at the same moment a ray of keen

light shot from the eastern sky across the sea; it pierced, as with some glittering spear-point, the dim pass in the piled vapour, and smote the damp canvas, the naked mastheads, the black gun-muzzles, of a schooner moving slowly right athwart the course of the *Hirondelle*!

She was under foresail and jibs, prudently content to merely hold her own till the fog lifted. There was a slack watch kept on her, for there was no hurry of alarm to show that the *Hirondelle* was sighted. There could be no doubt as to the character of the stranger; Frenchman and privateer were written on the rake of her masts, the run of her hull, the black lips of her guns. As Gaunt studied her with shrewd and eager eyes the flag hanging damp at the schooner's mizzen lazily blew aside, and showed the tricolour. It was *L'Aigle*, beyond doubt.

"Here's luck!" cried Litton gleefully, but in suppressed tones.

But Gaunt, as he stared at the Frenchman, thought of something nobler than "luck," something loftier than even wisest calculation. He certainly had found his enemies exactly where he guessed; but behind that "guess" was there not a directing wisdom more than human?

The moment, however, was hardly one for metaphysics. The two brigs might well be within gunshot, behind that screen of obscuring vapour. The fog might lift like a curtain at the next breath, and reveal them. A call to action so sudden and urgent is a test of resource, and Gaunt had a happy faculty for both swift vision and swift action.

One glance at the schooner was enough. He did not raise his voice. "Put your helm up, my man," he said quietly to the seaman at the wheel, and the head of the brig fell off instantly towards the schooner, by this time moving afresh into the concealment of the fog.

"Get the boarders away, Fraser. You shall lead them. But quietly, quietly, men," he added sternly, as an excited murmur ran along the brig's bulwarks.

There was a sound of naked feet running along the deck; the muffled voice of the boatswain's mate could be heard, as, stooping his head down the fore-castle companion, he called—

"All hands on deck! Boarders away!"

The faint clink of steel, as pike and cutlass were seized, ran through the brig, and was sharply hushed by the officers. It was a moment to test the efficiency of the brig's discipline; and Gaunt felt a thrill of just pride as he watched the black groups of the boarders, pike and cutlass in hand, the officers in their places, gather so quickly in the brig's head or amidships. Some of the more eager seamen were climbing into the rigging ready for the leap. Johnson's great figure could be seen forward, grapple in hand, waiting for the moment to swing. A whispered order, a mere gesture of Gaunt's hand, and fifty armed seamen would leap on the drowsy deck of the French schooner.

"No pistols, Fraser," said Gaunt; "carry her with the cutlass. And no shouting if you can help it. The brigs may be within hail."

Fraser leaped actively into the main rigging, and hung there, watching the blurred outline of the enemy through the half-light, while Gaunt himself conned the brig towards the Frenchman. The fog was slowly thinning, and, bit by bit, the schooner grew clear. The slanting jib became visible, then the naked topmasts, the black line of the bulwarks, the wet deck, the slowly-pacing figure of an officer muffled to his eyes near the wheel, a cluster of the watch under the low break of the forecastle. The Frenchmen were still more than half asleep!

Gaunt waved his hand to the helmsman, and, without sound or ripple, the *Hirondelle* crept up the Frenchman's quarter. At that moment the officer on the schooner's deck looked aft, stamping his feet as he turned, to warm them. As he turned he saw, breaking out of space, the sudden vision of the tall masts of the brig, the curving line of its bulwarks, frescoed with dark figures, in every attitude of readiness to leap, while the dim sparkle of steel gleamed here and there along that line of eager figures. It was as though the fog had suddenly crystallised into armed and terrible shapes!

The Frenchman probably didn't know Milton, or, at the sight of the brig's bulwarks, there might have flashed into his memory that famous picture of the gates of the lost Paradise, as Adam and Eve looked back on it—

“With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms!”

The menacing vision of the *Hirondelle* breaking

suddenly, without sound or warning, on the amazed eyes of the Frenchman, seemed for a moment to paralyse him. The next instant his hands were thrown up with a wild gesture, and an alarmed shout broke from his lips. But even while it was running through the misty air there came the soft shock of the gently colliding hulls, the clash of the flung grapnel; and, with a suppressed roar of fierce voices, the boarders were across the Frenchman's bulwarks, and sweeping, with brandished cutlass-blades and the sparkle of smiting steel, along her deck.

There was no withstanding a rush so sudden and so fierce. The schooner was carried, almost without a stroke! So complete was the surprise, so faint the resistance, so instant the success, that, as the boarders stayed their rush, with the Frenchmen on deck lying flung into the scuppers, in every attitude of helplessness, a low laugh ran through the crowd.

"Well, boys," said Johnson, "that's the softest thing I've seen yet. Johnny Crapaud was caught napping this time, and no mistake. And he is hardly awake yet!"

The astonished captain of the schooner had rushed, half-dressed, on deck, at the sound of the scuffle, and was promptly collared. Forward the French sailors were being handed up from the forecabin, and made to sit in a line under the bulwarks. An English seaman, obeying a gesture from Fraser, had stepped to the wheel, first knocking down the Frenchman that held it, and now stood leaning on it, with an easy air of proprietorship, and keeping

the course of the schooner parallel with that of the *Hirondelle*. One, at least, of the three privateers they were hunting was their prize; and seldom was a prize won more cheaply. The French captain, sitting on the breech of a gun, was still staring about him with bewildered and uncomprehending eyes. How was it the fog had suddenly broken into armed Englishmen?

As soon as Fraser reported the schooner to be in his possession, Gaunt gave his new orders without a moment's delay. The officers of the captured schooner, and part of the crew, were brought on board the *Hirondelle*; the brig's third officer, with Litton and twenty men under him, were sent on board the prize. Lieutenant Ball was a very youthful officer, and Johnson was sent with him to supply the necessary experience.

As Litton touched his cap, before going on board the schooner, Gaunt glanced at the bright, boyish face, with a smile on it that showed the white, perfect teeth, and it brought up a sudden vision of Irene. Johnson was just passing aft, and Gaunt, moved by some sudden impulse, put his hand on his shoulder.

"Take care of Litton, Johnson," he said earnestly. The seaman looked up half in wonder.

"Why, of course, sir," he replied with a smile.

Betwixt Johnson and Litton, as we have said, there was a tie of regard that secretly amused the entire brig. On the boy's side it was a despotic affection, that expressed itself in peremptory orders, and some-

times in much humorous scolding; on the big sailor's part it was a grim, dog-like, protecting affection, very entertaining to watch. "Take care of Litton?" Yes! Johnson would certainly do that!

At this stage "Uncle Insects," who had come on deck to find a captured Frenchman alongside the brig, and had been staring at the busy scene on the *Hirondelle's* deck through perplexed spectacles, stepped into the proceedings.

"Commander Gaunt," he said gravely, "I disapprove of fighting on general principles and under all circumstances, and it is plain that this vessel is deliberately preparing to thrust itself into a fresh combat, a transaction of which, on moral grounds, I must disapprove. The smaller vessel, I understand, is moving away from the scene of coming violence, and my nephew Geoffrey is to be on board her. I will therefore accompany him, with your permission."

"Uncle Insects" spoke with great dignity; he had plainly not yet forgiven the manner in which Gaunt had met his offer of sympathy, after the loss of the treasure was discovered.

"You can go on the schooner, certainly, if you wish, Mr. Inskip," replied Gaunt. "But the quarters are poor, and, as far as the chances of a fight are concerned, I fear you are not safe, even on her."

"It is not a question of being 'safe,' sir," said "Uncle Insects" hotly. "I trust I have no more of ignoble anxiety for the security of my own life and limbs than a man of philosophic temper ought to have."

"I meant 'safe' from any risk of the mental distress which the spectacle of a fight would cause you," replied Gaunt apologetically.

"Since I was indiscreet enough," said "Uncle Insects" majestically, "to embark on a ship whose business is fighting, I suppose I have no right to complain of this."

"But you didn't escape that distressing experience when you sailed in a peaceful merchant-ship."

"That is true, and it shows how unscientific are human relations, and for how little pure reason counts in this world of lunatics, that even peaceful commerce is dragged at the tail of war in this fashion."

"Well, Mr. Inskip, we can hardly discuss the general system of things at this moment. The Frenchmen won't wait! But a berth on the schooner is at your service if you seriously wish it." And "Uncle Insects," with the most precious part of his collection, was hurriedly transferred to the *Aigle*.

When all was clear the grapnels were cast off, and brig and schooner moved on side by side, under easy sail.

Gaunt found it impossible to extract anything from the disgusted captain of *L'Aigle*, but he easily ascertained, from the other prisoners, that, exactly as he guessed, the three privateers were to rendezvous somewhere off the Jumentos group. The *Bonnet Rouge* had parted company with the schooner in chase of a sail just before the previous night fell, but it would rejoin during the day; and the second

brig, the *Torche*, must be even now running down Crooked Channel. No trace of Mr. Friend's specie or jewels could be found on the *Aigle*, and no hint of its whereabouts could be extracted from the prisoners. But Gaunt was not disappointed on this account: he had no doubt the treasure was on board the *Bonnet Rouge*.

So far Gaunt's guess had proved curiously accurate, and luck had been with him. The odds, at least, were now changed; they were no longer three to one, but two against two. And, as he had now two vessels under his command, Gaunt changed his plans. The schooner, under Ball, was to cruise under easy sail off the entrance to Crooked Channel, giving no sign of her change of masters, and still flying the tri-colour; while the *Hirondelle* took a south-west course towards a cluster of islands within sight—Green Islands according to the chart. The *Bonnet Rouge*, Gaunt calculated, was coming up from the south; the *Hirondelle*, lying under the lee of the land, would be hidden from the Frenchman till escape was too late. When the French brig had passed the eastern end of the Bahama bank, the *Hirondelle* would run out and intercept her. The *Aigle*, meanwhile—her capture being unknown—would lure the two Frenchmen to their fate, or would intercept the other brig coming down Crooked Channel, and hold on to her till the *Hirondelle* came on to the scene of action.

The brig bore away to her station, and reached it after a brisk run of a couple of hours. By this time the sky was clear. The fog had gone. The

sea lay, a clear and glittering disc, fretted with ten thousand sparkling points of silver, under the sun. On that softly heaving floor of burnished metal the topmasts of the *Aigle* could be seen, showing sharp and almost black against the deep azure of the sky. But the wind had shifted suddenly to the south-east, and this circumstance troubled Gaunt. The *Hirondelle* would be much to leeward of any vessel running past on a northerly course. It was, however, too late to make any alteration in his plans.

It was late in the afternoon when the look-out reported a sail in sight to the east. It was just showing clear beyond a little patch of low, black coast, which the chart showed to be Farallon Islands. If that point of white sail was the *Bonnet Rouge*, then Gaunt's plans had gone awry. The French brig was much farther to the east than he hoped; it had plainly run through the channel betwixt the Farallon cluster and the southern extremity of Crooked Island. The Frenchman, in a word, was nearly ten miles to windward of him; there could be no question of a surprise, or of a sudden dash. It must be a long, uncertain chase, with many chances of escape.

Gaunt had climbed to the cross-trees, and stood there anxiously meditating. The topsails of the brig and of the schooner were both in sight; the Frenchman was a little south of east, the schooner N.N.E., and both vessels were about equidistant from the *Hirondelle*, and both far to windward. Here was a perplexing situation.

While Gaunt stared at the two pin-points on the horizon with frowning brows, Fraser, who stood beside him with his glasses to his eyes, said in a surprised voice—

"The schooner is signalling, sir."

Gaunt frowned afresh; that was at least indiscreet. It was part of his plan that no hint should be given to the privateers that the schooner had changed masters, still less that she had a consort within signalling distance. Ball was forgetting his instructions; he might easily give the alarm to a shy and suspicious privateer. Gaunt put his glass to his eye and studied the signal.

"I can make nothing of it, Fraser; do you try."

Fraser scanned the little distant specks of colour with care.

"It's Greek to me, sir. Ball must have invented a code of his own. Those flags resemble nothing in our signal-book."

Both officers scrutinised the far-off tiny flags with perplexed looks.

"By Jove, sir," cried Fraser, "it's not meant for us! The French brig is answering the signal."

Gaunt looked with incredulous eyes. Yes, beyond doubt, the *Bonnet Rouge* had seen the signal from the schooner, and was obeying it! Some answering signal was at her peak; she had altered her course in response to it, and was running straight down to her old consort. Gaunt and Fraser stared at each other for a moment, and then both broke into involuntary laughter. Fraser grew sober first.

"Is it possible," he asked, "that the French prisoners we left on board have recaptured the schooner?"

"Oh no! But the signal puzzles me completely. Ball isn't capable of inventing a new code on the spur of the moment and tricking the Frenchman with it. That young scamp Litton might do it. But, no! It is impossible. Yet, beyond doubt, the schooner has signalled to the French brig, and the signal is understood and answered. What on earth is up?"

"One thing is clear," said Fraser, "the French brig is giving up the wind to us."

"Yes," said Gaunt gravely; "but how will the schooner fare if the Frenchman closes on her? He certainly carries too many men and too heavy metal for Ball. We must run out to the schooner's help. But we'll wait a bit longer, the French brig is coming more within reach every mile she travels on her present course."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FIGHT ON THE SCHOONER

“ And thus, with eyes that would not shrink,
With knee to man unbent,
Unfaltering on its dreadful brink
To his red grave he went.
Vain, mightiest fleets of iron framed ;
Vain, those all-shattering guns ;
Unless proud England keep untamed,
The strong heart of her sons ! ”

—Sir F. DOYLE.

THE captured French schooner was a beautiful model, very broad in the beam, with fine lines, masts of daring height, and canvas of daring spread. It was fortunate that the *Hirondelle* had stumbled on her in the fog, after the fashion we have described. She might well have had some difficulty, especially in the light breeze, in running down a craft so fast and shy. She was armed with six-pounders, and a long 12-pounder mounted amidships. She was dirty and ragged, but the ordinary, heavy-sterned merchant-ship would have had a small chance of escaping from such an ocean wasp.

The schooner had been hastily searched, and her papers examined before the *Hirondelle* parted company ; but as soon as the few prisoners left on board

had been secured, the watches set, and the British crew had fallen into the routine of their duties, Litton, with a boy's sharp-sighted curiosity, proceeded to examine the prize more closely on his own account. He sniffed with scornful disgust at many things he discovered; but amongst the captain's papers he stumbled on a prize of real value. It was a manuscript signal-book, with clusters of flags rudely drawn, and their meanings written opposite.

The code was brief; it covered only about a score of sentences, but its symbols were quite strange to Litton, and, as he had been signal midshipman, he scanned the strange code with expert and curious eyes. The messages were peculiar: "Chase to the east," or "Too strong for us," "Start for rendezvous," &c. At last, with a keen sparkle in his eye, Litton guessed the secret of the signal-book. It was a private code arranged betwixt the three privateers, who were cruising in common, and arranged so that they could communicate without any ship in sight being able to read their signals.

As Litton hung over the much-thumbed and not very cleanly pages, his face broke into a smile. He looked up at last, and slapped the table with boyish glee.

"By Jove!" he cried, "this will help us to trick the Frenchmen."

He hurried on deck and found the lieutenant staring through his glass at a tiny and gleaming point that pricked the skyline to the south-east.

"Litton," he said, "I believe that is the French

brig; the breeze has shifted, and she is bringing it down with her. She is to windward of both the *Hirondelle* and the schooner. I don't think we could head her off if we tried. In this wind she would run past us and join her consort somewhere up Crooked Channel. If we tried to head her off it would only give her the alarm."

"Well, sir," replied Litton, "here's something which will save us the trouble of running after the Frenchman, and make him come down to us in the most obliging manner and put his head in the noose."

Ball stared at Litton.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

Litton produced the code he had discovered, and the two lads—for the lieutenant was only a lad—after staring at it for a brief time, looked at each other and broke into laughter.

"Yes, Litton! This ought to trick the Frenchman right enough. It's plain that the three privateers talk to each other by this code. The fellow in command of yon brig doesn't know the *Aigle* has changed flags, and the signal ought to bring him right down to us. She is too far off yet; but look out the signals. That one to 'Close to' will do. It seems both simple and clear."

Litton quickly had the flags spread out on the deck, and the cluster chosen was presently run up to the schooner's peak. The seamen gazed up at the flags curiously, as they fluttered in the freshening breeze. This strange signal was talking to the Frenchman; and, see! she read it and answered it.

Yes! a flag had run up to the strange brig's peak. She had changed her course, and was running straight for the schooner. The nature of the trick was at last guessed by the men forward, or whispered to them, and it awoke many a gleeful chuckle. Here was Johnny Crapaud saving them the trouble of chasing him! He was coming meekly up like a goose to have its neck wrung. Great was the laughter along the deck of the *Aigle* as they read the meaning and saw the success of the trick.

Only Johnson looked grave; and, screening his eyes with his hand, searched the skyline to the south-west, where the *Hirondelle* ought to be. Then he cast an odd look at Litton, who was perched in the main-rigging, watching with a triumphant smile the Frenchman bearing down to them.

"Yon fellow can sting," said Johnson, half to himself.

Yes; the *Bonnet Rouge* was plainly a very formidable craft. She was more than twice the tonnage of the *Aigle*, had certainly twice her weight of fire, and probably carried three times her crew. In a duel a brig so powerful ought to sink the schooner in half-an-hour.

The seamen who formed the crew of the *Aigle* at this moment did not, however, in the least share that belief. They grumbled at the state of the guns they had to work, and were scornful of French powder and ball; but they prepared to fight the approaching brig with the most cheerful certainty of

victory. And their officers were more gaily reckless than the sailors themselves. Ball was too young to take advice, still less to ask it. He was in command for the first time in his life. He was only a gallant boy, full of a boy's glee at the trick which was bringing the Frenchman within reach of his guns. But he had a man's courage, and he meant to fight the schooner while she floated. The *Hirondelle* would, no doubt, appear on the scene before the fight was ended; this, indeed, was the very essence of the plan on which both brig and schooner were acting. But on that Ball, somehow, did not reflect with any pleasure. He wanted to win the desperate game off his own bat!

Litton suddenly recollected his uncle at this moment, and looked round. That philosopher was watching the whole busy scene with absorbed eyes.

"There is going to be a fight, uncle," said Litton, "and you had better go below, so as to be out of the way."

"Well, Geoff, an entomologist is worth a little more to the world than a midddy, I hope; but," said "Uncle Insects" coolly, "I don't feel inclined to go below. The fight, if there is to be one, is a very unhappy business; but, since I cannot escape, it will have a scientific interest for me. I always objected to you going into the navy, because of the risk of incidents like this; and it is a very distressing thing that a man of my age and principles should find himself in such a situation. But, Geoff,

you don't think a man of science is more disposed to run away from danger than a young scamp of a middy?"

"No, uncle, I don't," said Litton heartily.

This particular man of science certainly was not likely to indulge in any such discreditable performance. It was easy to smile at "Uncle Insects'" oddities; but nobody who looked at the lines of his face, or met the flash of his eye, could suspect him of any ignoble over-concern for the safety of his own limbs and life.

"I shall look on merely as a scientific observer," said "Uncle Insects," turning the twin orbs of his spectacles on the approaching Frenchman. "The sight, no doubt, will be brutal and distressing; but, since the business is thrust on me, I shall contemplate it from the scientific standpoint, and, I hope, in the scientific spirit; exactly as I should watch the quarrels of a nest of termites."

"But, uncle, you are an ant in the nest, and may get bitten; and then," said the boy with a laugh, "you'll want to bite back!"

"You young scamp! I shall do nothing so foolish, and so inconsistent with the views I hold."

Lieutenant Ball had come up, and listened for a moment to the conversation. "I ought to send you below, Mr. Inskip," he said briefly; "but you may do as you like. Only, keep out of the road, and don't interfere with anything."

"I shall not meddle in this most unhappy business," "Uncle Insects" replied, with great

dignity. "I am, on scientific principles, a non-combatant;" and he walked away with much stateliness.

Ball cast a quick glance round the schooner as the Frenchman drew steadily near.

His slender crew, when distributed along the guns, could hardly man the whole broadside; yet they set to work cheerfully, stripping themselves half-naked in preparation for the fray. Johnson took charge of the 12-pounder; its voice was to dominate the stormy chorus of the guns! Ball, with a flush on his cheek and his chin tilted proudly up, walked along the deck.

"We'll try to cripple her," he said to his men, "so that she can't run before the *Hirondelle* turns up. Lay your guns for her masts," he added, in the tone of an admiral directing the fire of a three-decker.

Steadily the French brig came on, a tall pile of symmetrical canvas from deck to truck; a white jet of spray at her forefoot telling her speed. Ball was, for the moment, perplexed by the very completeness with which the trick of the false signal had succeeded. He could not fire on his enemy without giving her warning. It would be like shooting at an unarmed man. Yet the brig was coming up fast, and without suspicion.

While he hesitated, the difficulty solved itself. Captain Giron had a pair of particularly keen eyes, and, as the brig closed, he was struck with something strange in the aspect of the schooner's deck. It was

curiously empty and silent. What had become of the noisy, picturesque, and diversely-garbed crew that should crowd his consort's deck? Only one or two figures could be seen upon it, with a solitary officer on the poop.

Captain Giron stared at the *Aigle* through his glass, long, and with quickening curiosity. Then, with one foul, deep oath, he roared out an order to the man at the wheel, and the brig swung round with a suddenness that set all her canvas flapping wildly. Just at that moment the schooner fired a gun to leeward, the English flag ran to her peak, and an officer, leaping into her rigging, with an arrogant and very youthful voice called on the Frenchman to "strike to His British Majesty's schooner, the *Aigle!*"

The clamour of voices on the brig was loud and shrill; fifty eager faces stared at the schooner over her bulwarks with open-mouthed curiosity, and then disappeared in frantic haste, as Captain Giron's bull-voice was heard pouring out stentorian orders, plentifully besprinkled with oaths.

"The accursed English!" he cried, as he grasped the astonishing fact that his consort, in some mysterious way, and apparently without a shot being fired, had been made a prize. Made a prize, too, by some craft that seemed to have emerged out of space and vanished back into it; for she was nowhere visible. The trick of the signal, too! And Captain Giron swore afresh, and in deeper tones, as he thought of it. But no quicker or

more resolute seaman was on a French deck anywhere than the captain of the *Bonnet Rouge*; and, with a few fierce orders, the brig's guns were cast loose and manned, and their crews, in furious haste, were loading them.

Johnson's 12-pounder was the first to speak. A jet of flame broke from its iron lips, and the hurtling shot struck and dismounted one of the brig's 9-pounders, and tumbled its crew, a heap of struggling and bleeding figures, on the deck. Then the 6-pounders that formed the schooner's broadside snapped venomously; but they were drowned in the roar of the brig's heavier metal.

The sudden fight had a curious fierceness in it. It began, so to speak, without any preliminaries, and, on the French side, was a furious anger at the trick which had brought them down. The smoke rose in black masses; the guns thundered incessantly. Johnson's 12-pounder flashed with methodical diligence, and its shot wrought cruel mischief on the brig's deck. One lucky shot at last brought down the brig's foretopmast. At least she was too crippled for flight.

But the heavier metal of the Frenchman was rending the schooner to fragments. Three of her guns were dismounted; out of her scanty crew of less than thirty men, seven were already struck down. The smoke blew in strangling clouds over her deck, while the brig, lying to windward, was comparatively free.

"Uncle Insects" stood leaning against the

schooner's taffrail while the iron rain swept over the little craft. He heard the whip of the torn ratlines, the crash of the splintered bulwarks, as the enemy's broadsides wrought cruel mischief. The smoke of the schooner's guns lay low and thick on her deck, and through the strangling vapour he could see dimly the half-naked seamen toiling at their guns; the incessant red flashes, the eddying gusts of black smoke witnessing to their fierce diligence.

"This is very unpleasant," said "Uncle Insects," "and it is very unscientific. I never witnessed anything like this before."

Yet his nostrils dilated as he watched the scene; he found his fingers clutching themselves involuntarily. He was conscious of an eager, though, perhaps, very unscientific, desire that these unpleasant Frenchmen, scourging the schooner's decks with their flying shot, should be repaid in kind; repaid promptly, and in overrunning measure.

A seaman at one of the guns near him suddenly collapsed, and lay face down, and with twitching limbs, on the deck. His comrades lifted him hurriedly, and carried him to the shelter of the bulwark; and "Uncle Insects" hastened to the man, and, with nimble and gentle fingers, began to dress his wound. The skill bred of so many years of specimen-collecting served him well, and the quickly multiplying number of the wounded kept him busy.

The Frenchman presently drew ahead of the

schooner, and for a time the firing grew slack. Captain Giron was busy cutting the hamper of his fallen foremast clear, so that he could cross the bows of the schooner, and rake her, or at least close with her, and carry her by boarding.

During this brief pause in the combat "Uncle Insects" found time to look round. The schooner's deck was strewn with wreckage; the gun nearest to him was silent, a little cluster of fallen bodies lying about it told why. Two men were working a gun close to him; they had run it in and loaded it, and were stooping over it to run it out; but, as they bent, one of the two suddenly started erect, whirled round, and fell prostrate. A shot had passed through his body. His mate looked round, and his glance met that of "Uncle Insects."

There was a silent challenge in it, a wordless appeal so urgent, that "Uncle Insects'" legs, in the most unscientific manner—apparently of their own accord, and without waiting for any instructions from his better-instructed head—hurried to the breech of the gun. He stooped over it, and helped to run it out; the seaman glanced fiercely along the sights and fired. While the smoke was still eddying back through the port, "Uncle Insects" was straining every muscle pulling the gun back to be reloaded.

Litton passed at that moment, and stopped to stare. Here was the astonishing vision of "Uncle Insects," spectacles on nose, his face red with energy helping with all his might to work a gun!

Just then the Frenchman's 9-pounders barked angrily, a blast of shot swept past them, and the seaman on the other side of the gun's breech sank on the deck with his legs shattered; "Uncle Insects" looked up, and met the astonished eyes of Litton.

"Yes," said the philosopher unashamedly, "I was helping this brave fellow! That Frenchman is making himself quite too unpleasant, and we must try to stop him;" and, with much dignity, he proceeded to examine the seaman's shattered limb. "Uncle Insects," in a word, was caught in the whirl and hurry of a fight, and, with all his "scientific" principles, was swept away by it! But there was no time to stop and wonder over the spectacle, or even so much as to smile at it; the passion of the fight was too fierce, the crisis too near and urgent.

Johnson, meanwhile, kept up a cool and deadly fire with his 12-pounder, and Captain Giron swore fiercely as he watched the mischief that one well-fought gun was working. The brig's guns broke wrathfully into fire again, and the deck of the schooner was ripped and torn with the flying shot.

"This is hot work," said Ball to Litton, with a cheerful smile; "but the *Hirondelle* ought to turn up soon."

At that moment the gallant young fellow staggered and sank, a little heap of quivering limbs, on the deck, while through the smoke, and from a new direction, a fresh tempest of stormy sound and flying iron broke on the unfortunate schooner.

Litton stared to leeward; through the smoke he could see the tall masts of a second brig sliding past. While he stared and wondered Johnson came up.

"The 12-pounder is dismounted," he said coolly, "and there's another Frenchman to leeward firing into us, wherever she has come from."

Litton, however, guessed what had happened. The third privateer, running down Crooked Passage, had appeared on the scene, and, guessing the situation, had at once broken into the fight; and the over-matched schooner was caught between two fires.

"Where is Lieutenant Ball, sir?" asked Johnson, and Litton, for reply, cast a shuddering glance at the fallen body of his officer at his feet.

"That's bad, sir," said Johnson gravely. "More than half the men are down, and here's a second Frenchman come into the fight. Where's the *Hiron-delle*? There's no sign of her, and it's madness to resist any longer."

Litton looked up with a flash of anger. Johnson's words stung him. He was only a boy, and into the palm of his boyish hand was suddenly cast the cruel weight of a responsibility like this. Should the schooner strike? Litton had been nurtured in a gallant school; and all the courage native to his blood, all the pride of his caste, took fire at the question. The heroic traditions of the service, a hundred stories of unconquerable valour—valour that died, but refused to yield—swept into his imagination and kindled it to fire. His cheeks flushed hotly.

"I am in command now, Johnson," he cried. "You know that, don't you? I am in command now," he repeated.

Johnson nodded quietly. He was looking, half in wonder, at the lad. His voice was shrill and high—more boyish, in fact, than usual; his fingers were twitching. He was in a mood of half-hysterical excitement.

"But it's madness to fight any longer, sir," repeated the big seaman. "The *Hirondelle* has failed us."

"Johnson," the boy cried passionately, "it would break my heart to pull down the flag."

Johnson looked at him. Yes! it was true. The lad's gallant temper made surrender more dreadful than death. And the rough sailor had insight enough to see this, and the spirit to admire it. He would not hurt the brave lad's pride, nor stain his honour.

"We'll fight, sir," he said simply, "as long as you give the word. But they are going to board," he added, pointing to the strange brig which was closing on the schooner, her bulwarks and rigging black with men ready to leap on the wrecked deck of the sorely battered little craft.

"Yes, but I am in command, Johnson; and we'll not strike! What would Captain Gaunt say? We'll not strike, Johnson!" he insisted.

"No, sir; of course not," said the big seaman soothingly. "Here, lads," he cried to the scanty survivors of the schooner's crew, who were still working their guns, "they are going to board. Let's beat these beggars back."

Less than a dozen seamen came stumbling up, cutlass or pike, hastily snatched up, in hand; but they were visibly exhausted, and their faces were smoke-blackened.

"Now, men," cried Litton, "I am in command; and," he added, with a sudden drop in his high-pitched voice, "all the beggars in the middies' berth on board the flagship would laugh at me if we surrendered. The *Hirondelle* is sure to come up, and we'll fight till we sink. I am to lead, Johnson," he insisted, his voice running up again shrilly.

"All right, sir," replied Johnson cheerfully, as he stepped aside to let Litton—a cutlass in his boyish hand—take his place in front of the little smoke-begrimed group.

Just then the tall figure of "Uncle Insects" came up. He was bareheaded, his dress was disordered, his face black with smoke, his hands red with blood from the wounds he had dressed; his great spectacles still bestrode his high-bridged nose.

"What is this?" he asked, as he saw the group of seamen gathering round Litton.

Johnson pointed silently with his cutlass to the French brig, her outlines dimly visible through the smoke; the fierce faces of the Frenchmen in the rigging, ready for their leap, could be discerned. "Uncle Insects" readjusted his spectacles, and contemplated the sight with great gravity.

"They are coming on board," he asked, "to complete the mischief they have done?" Nobody replied to him; Litton at that moment was making his

appeal to his men not to surrender. His uncle turned and looked at him, struck by the high and curious note in his voice.

“We’ll not surrender!” he was crying.

“Quite right,” said “Uncle Insects” briskly; “it is most improper for these men to come on board in this fashion;” and, looking round, he picked up a cutlass lying on the deck, and added himself to the little group of Englishmen.

“Well done! old fellow,” cried Johnson heartily, patting him on the shoulder, and forgetting all formalities in the excitement of the moment. “Uncle Insects” made no reply; he was readjusting his glasses, and, with chin in air, glared fiercely at the black outlines of the French boarders, as they hung in the rigging.

At that moment the schooner reeled with the shock of the brig’s hull closing on it, and a swarm of boarders leaped down on her deck. Litton met the foremost Frenchman, an officer, gallantly; but his strength was no match for his powerful antagonist. His guard was beaten down, he stood open to his foeman’s stroke; but Johnson, in an instant, struck up the Frenchman’s blade, and, hitting fiercely with his left hand, knocked him senseless. The fight eddied round the little group of Englishmen; and, so determined was their resistance, that the attack for a moment fell back.

In the struggle “Uncle Insects” found himself in the midst of a swearing, jostling crowd, squeezed, thrust from side to side, hitting in blind fashion, and

being hit at. When the Frenchmen for a moment fell back, the astonished and breathless scientist found the blade of his cutlass—he could not tell why—running with blood.

Litton's cutlass, too, was blood-stained; he was staggering from wounds. Johnson, bareheaded, with blood running down one cheek, stood by Litton with something of the look of a wounded lion defending a cub.

"Well done, sir!" he gasped with a smile.

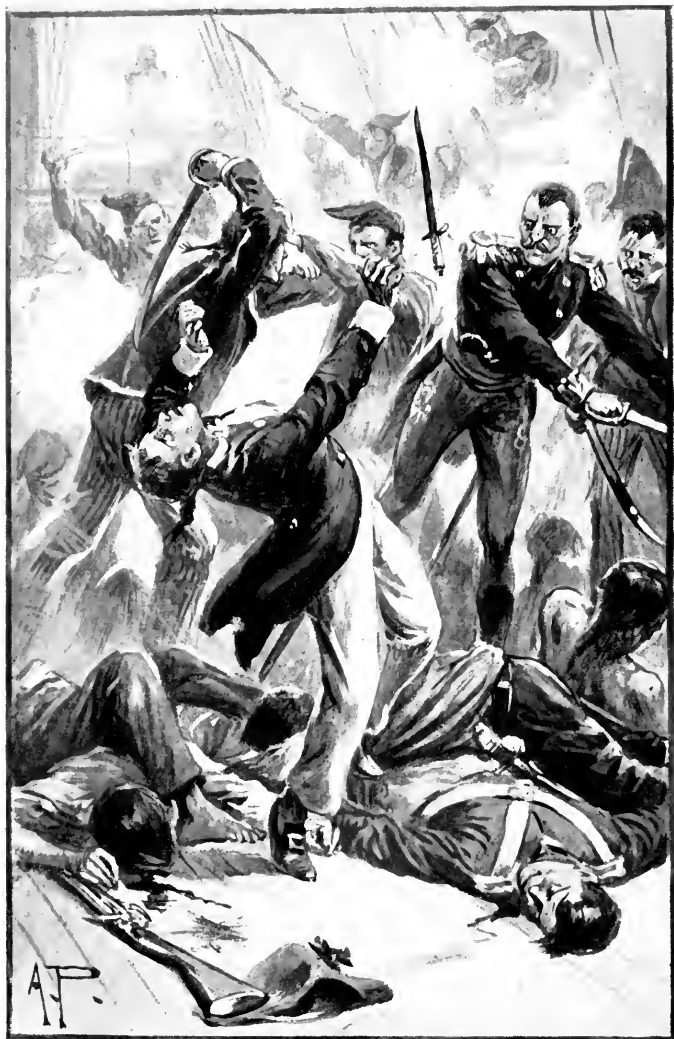
"Rendez-vous," cried the French captain, striking down the weapons of his men. "The schooner is ours. Surrender!"

"No!" cried Litton, in the same curious high-pitched voice. "Surrender be hanged!" Then he added in French, "Englishmen don't surrender!"

A French sailor, meanwhile, had clambered on to the bulwark, and, steadying his musket against the rigging, took deliberate aim at the gallant lad.

He fired; Litton threw back his arms, stumbled, recovered himself—"Mother!" he cried—and fell. Johnson stooped for a moment over the fallen boy; but one glance at his face was enough. The shot was mortal! The big seaman lifted himself up and looked round on the Frenchmen; and there was that in his face which, somehow, made them give back a step.

The seaman in the rigging who had fired the fatal shot was looking down with a grin of triumph on his face. Johnson, with a hoarse cry, flung himself on the Frenchman. There was a furious struggle, but



“‘MOTHER!’ HE CRIED, AND FELL.”

the height and reach of the big Englishman made him for the moment irresistible. He broke through to the bulwark, and, with one fierce blow, slew the Frenchman there. Then he was cut at and stabbed on every side; but he fought his way back to the spot where the body of Litton lay, and pitched heavily on the deck beside him.

“Uncle Insects” caught the red flash of the musket, and looked round. Litton had fallen, the big figure of Johnson was stooping over him. At that sight, “Uncle Insects” flung down his weapon and ran up to the fallen boy, and began, with hurried and trembling fingers, to examine his wounds. As he stooped, a bullet struck him on the head, and he fell insensible.

CHAPTER XXX

WITH THE "HIRONDELLE"

"What of grey dangers afar,
In spaces uncharted, untrod?"

—RICE.

THE Frenchmen were victorious; they had recaptured the schooner; but even while they looked round in triumph on the blood-splashed deck, a sudden tumult of shouts arose on the *Bonnet Rouge*; and above even that clamour rolled the deep and sullen thunder of guns. The *Hirondelle* was coming at last into the fight!

Gaunt had soon guessed the mystery of the strange signal which the schooner was showing and the French brig was answering. It was intelligible that the three privateers had an agreed and private code. Ball—or, rather, as Gaunt, with a half-smile, guessed, Litton—must have discovered it, and the temptation to use it was irresistible. Gaunt smiled afresh as he pictured the heads of the two young fellows bent over the Frenchman's code. Then he knitted his brows anxiously.

"The trick is clever," he said to Fraser; "it is plucky too—the young dogs! The Frenchman is

deceived by it, and is giving up his weatherly position. But it is confoundedly risky. The brig will knock the schooner to chips; and," he added—his quick brain forecasting what was actually to happen—"the other brig may turn up suddenly from the north, and then Ball will himself be in a trap. Fraser," he cried, "we must run out at once and take our share in this business, even at the risk of giving the *Bonnet Rouge* the alarm too soon. Those young scamps will be destroyed."

The crew were as eager for action as their officers. They saw the strange brig running down towards the schooner, and knew that little craft must be in deadly peril. A few brief orders, and the *Hirondelle*—her sails spreading themselves like the wings of a sea-bird, and as though by a volition of their own—moved out from the point of land which had hitherto hidden her. A keen watch was kept on the French brig, but there came from her no sign that the *Hirondelle* was seen. The Frenchman's look-outs had, at that moment, suddenly become curious about the schooner, and were intent in another direction.

Gaunt frowned as the sound of the first gun rolled faintly over the sea. The brig must make a long leg to windward before she could run down to the scene of the fight, and the wind showed signs of falling. It seemed cruelly possible that he might have to look on and see the schooner destroyed, without power to help her; and Gaunt's eyes ran anxiously over the soaring canvas of the *Hirondelle*, and then

over the floor of the sea, and to the skyline to windward. Every art his seamanship knew was used to carry the *Hirondelle* as swiftly as possible to the scene of action.

But, for all his eagerness, Gaunt was too cool and good a seaman to go about too soon. He must make sure of being able to reach the fight before he tacked, and he kept his course till every sailor in the brig was swearing softly with impatience. The gallant little schooner was hidden under a cloud of smoke, but her guns barked incessantly, and a roar of delight ran along the deck of the *Hirondelle* as the foretopmast of the French brig was seen hanging to leeward.

"They are not firing blank cartridges on the schooner, boys!" cried Peters with glee.

Gaunt was naturally the most anxious man on the *Hirondelle*; an anxiety, indeed, as sharp as a knife was stabbing him as he watched the guns of the French brig flashing incessantly into the smoke that hid the schooner. Litton, the brother of the girl he loved, was in that hell of fire, sent there by his orders. Gaunt recalled the look on the boy's face as he left the brig to join the schooner. Was that bright-faced boy going unconsciously to his death; and had his orders sent him to that dark goal? It gave him no consolation—it only added a new sharpness to his anxiety—to remember how he had told Johnson to "take care of young Litton." That very warning, as it was recalled, seemed an evil omen.

Just then the look-out on the brig's foremast hailed the deck, and reported a sail to the N.N.E., in the very throat of Crooked Passage. Fraser ran up with his glasses and examined the stranger.

"It's a brig," he reported, "just clear of the channel; another Frenchman, by the cut of his canvas."

"That's the missing privateer," said Gaunt, "and Ball will be caught betwixt two fires;" and, in spite of his cool self-control, he stamped his foot on the deck in an angry fire of impatience. But still he must not go about before he was certain of being able to make the schooner; yet every moment he hung on tortured him, and sent a growl of discontent along the brig's deck. The one bit of luck in favour of the *Hirondelle* was that the Frenchmen had not yet discovered her approach. They were too eagerly absorbed in the business of destroying or capturing the unfortunate schooner.

At last Gaunt, with a quick wave of his hand, gave the order to go about, and never before had the yards of the *Hirondelle* swung round with such furious speed.

"Get to your guns, lads!" cried Fraser.

At that moment the French brig seemed to discover the new actor coming swiftly, yet with such grim and cool deliberation, into the fight. An officer leaped into her main rigging, and hung there with his glass to his eyes; there was a vision of running figures along the deck. Her port battery was plainly being hurriedly manned, the lighter guns on the

corvette's poop were hastily fired. But the English brig was now coming fast into the fight. Peters was already squinting along the great 32-pounder midships. Every man was in an angry fervour of eagerness; and Gaunt, though himself the most eager of the crowd, had yet to steady his crew with a few stern words. He would not deliver his blow too soon. Every moment of waiting was an exasperation; but his cool brain had the mastery over his fretting and impatient temper.

Gaunt stood by the heavy gun forward, measuring the slowly narrowing distance with his eye. Peters was glancing restlessly along the sights; the crew of the gun stood round in every attitude of eagerness.

"Now, Peters," said Gaunt, "if you ever levelled that gun well, do it now."

With a gesture, the head of the brig swung a point off, so as to give the gun a clear range over the starboard bow.

"Go ahead, Peters," said Gaunt quietly.

The bending figure of the gunner grew rigid for an instant; then, with a quick jerk of his right hand, a red flame leaped from the iron throat of the great gun. Peters sprang up to watch the shot, while the men toiled savagely to reload. A jet of spray at the brig's stern, and then his main yardarm flew into splinters.

"A good line, Peters, but the ricochet threw the ball up."

Peters made no reply, he was laying the gun again. This time the ball struck the stern of the brig, the

splinters flying high, and there was evidently much confusion on the French privateer. She could not swing round to escape being raked, owing to the hamper of her fallen mast, but her stern-chasers flashed angrily. They were comparatively light pieces, however, while the 32-pounder of the *Hirondelle* had deadly range and weight. Again and again Peters raked the French brig. Then the *Hirondelle* moved slowly, but with stately grace, betwixt the *Bonnet Rouge* and the schooner, while the broadsides of both vessels broke into swift and angry flame.

"I'll take the boarders on the schooner, Fraser; you close with the Frenchman and finish his business."

Fraser wondered for a moment that his captain should leave the brig; but he obeyed the order silently. The *Hirondelle* moved steadily along the torn hull of the schooner, steered with perfect skill; and Gaunt, with twenty picked men, leaped on her deck.

There was no resistance. The dead and the wounded lay thick on the reddened planks; a handful of British seamen, the only survivors of the crew, leaned, in every attitude of exhaustion, against the bulwarks, or in the break of the little poop. The second French brig had seen the *Hirondelle* coming into the fight, and heard the roar of its heavy metal, and it was hastily putting off, abandoning its companion to her fate. The sound of the *Hirondelle's* 32-pounder was disquieting, and the Frenchman had

no desire to exchange broadsides with so formidable an antagonist. The bond of comradeship betwixt the privateers was plainly woven of very slender films.

Gaunt looked eagerly round the deck of the schooner.

"Well done, lads!" he said to the scanty and weary survivors of the crew; "gallantly done! But where are your officers?"

No man spoke, but one seaman, whose forehead was seamed with a cruel gash, silently pointed aft to a little heap of fallen bodies near the poop. As Gaunt moved towards it with a sinking heart, he heard a cheer from the *Hirondelle*, and glanced up. The flag of the *Bonnet Rouge* was fluttering down; the Frenchman had already struck, and Gaunt found time, even in the tumult of his feelings, to think: "Captain Giron is down, or that flag would be flying still." Then he stooped over the fallen bodies.

Ball was desperately wounded, but still alive. Beside him, the blood creeping in a red stream over his forehead—but his huge spectacles still fixed firmly on his nose—lay the unconscious body of "Uncle Insects." Litton was dead! He had been shot through the body, and had several cutlass wounds; a smile was still on his boyish face. Half across his body lay the great figure of Johnson, cruelly gashed with wounds. He opened his eyes as Gaunt bent over him.

"Oh, the brave laddie," he whispered, "the brave laddie!"

Then he added, still more faintly—

"I tried to take care of him, sir; I tried——"
his voice failed, and the gallant fellow was dead.

Gaunt's face was stern and white with pain. That boyish countenance, with a half smile on the clear features, upon which death had set its changeless and icy seal, tore his heart with grief. What a bright flame of youthful life was quenched! How could he tell Irene? Would she ever forgive him?

But he was the commander still, with the care of his men upon him, and a desperate fight still unfinished. Fraser had wisely made no attempt to take possession of the *Bonnet Rouge*; the *Hirondelle* had moved ahead until it was clear of the schooner, and her guns bore upon the *Torche*. Then a line of flame ran along her whole length as Gaunt looked; she was raking the French brig cruelly. Again, and yet again, the guns roared, the deep note of the 32-pounder dominating all other sounds. Then there came a sudden blast of sound from the French brig. Her decks flew up. Her masts fell, as though suddenly struck by some Titanic hand. A column of flame and smoke shot into the sky; the air was full of flying fragments.

Some chance shot had struck the privateer's magazine, and she had blown up. The fight was ended, and the *Hirondelle* was running down to the scene of the explosion to pick up as many of the survivors as she could.

Gaunt looked round with half-dazed eyes. He

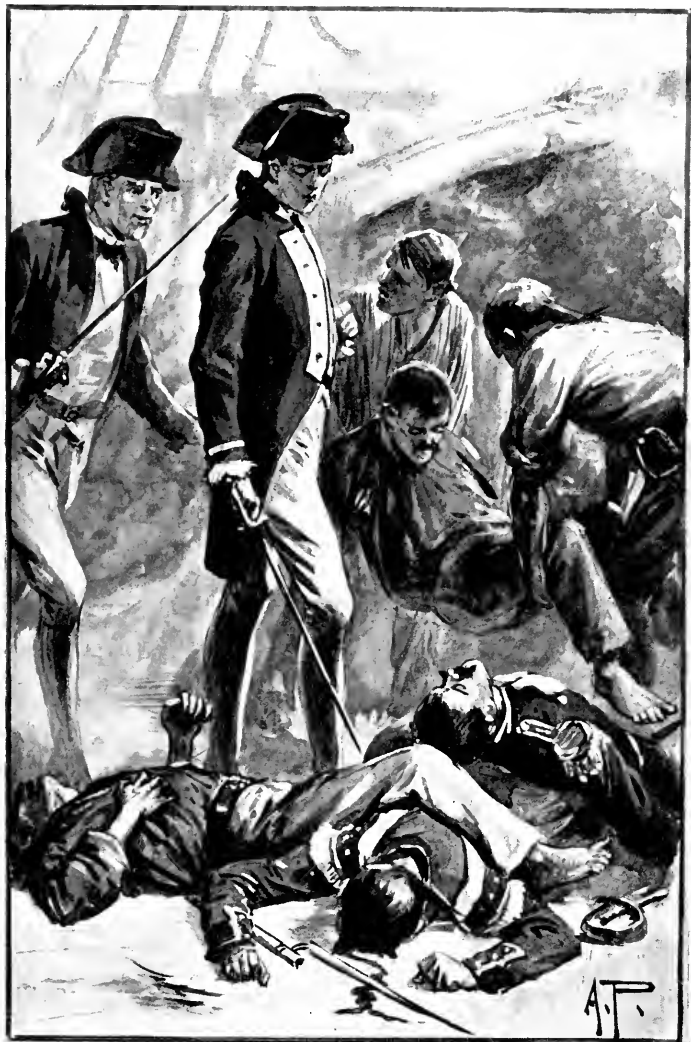
had achieved a marvellous success. Of the three French privateers, one was destroyed, two were prizes. He, somehow, had no doubt that on the *Bonnet Rouge* he would find the dead body of Captain Giron, and the missing treasure and despatches with which his honour was bound up. The long duel with the Frenchman was ended, and he was triumphant. Yet, as he looked down at the dead boy's face, he knew that he had bought even a success so splendid at too dear a rate.

Litton's body was carried into the schooner's low cabin; the surgeon was busy amongst the wounded, and Gaunt, feeling as though the shot which killed the gallant lad had passed through his own flesh, went about his work as commander.

On boarding the *Bonnet Rouge* he found scribbled on every side deadly traces of the raking fire of the 32-pounder. The wheel was smashed; half the brig's guns were dismounted. Her boats were in splinters; her deck was scored with long furrows. As he had guessed, Captain Giron lay dead. A flying fragment of the shattered wheel had struck him on the head, and, beneath the cap-like mass of almost blue-black hair, the broad, audacious forehead was crushed in. There was nothing more to fear from that plotting brain.

Fraser came up to congratulate Gaunt, but there was no smile of triumph on his commanding officer's face.

"The men have done well," he said; "we have



"CAPTAIN GIRON LAY DEAD"



put an end to these wasps, and I have no doubt that Mr. Friend's specie and the despatches are here on board. But, O Fraser!" he cried, with a groan, "what a price we have paid!"

Then Gaunt pulled himself together. It was no time for private griefs. His own crew had suffered grievously. Of the men sent on board the schooner there were only five unwounded. The French prisoners were almost double his own crew in number. For a couple of hours, Gaunt was busy seeing to his wounded, repairing damages, securing his prisoners, collecting the bodies of the slain. Then he examined Captain Giron's cabin.

- Yes! the treasure lay untouched. The despatches had been opened and read, but not destroyed. His honour was safe, and he could face his admiral without shame. Fortune had been strangely kind to him. He was now a comparatively rich man, for his share of the *Divina Provvidenzia* would be nearly £20,000. He had a reasonable claim for promotion, too; but Gaunt looked down at the recovered treasure with a bitter smile. Would Sir John forgive him for the loss of his son? And, a more bitter question still, would not the face of the dead boy come forever betwixt him and the girl to whom his heart was, once for all, given?

CHAPTER XXXI

QUIET TIMES

“Our brows are bound with spindrift, and the weed is on our knees ;
Our loins are battered 'neath us by the swinging, smoking seas.”

—KILPING.

TEN days after the fight with the privateers off Crooked Island, the *Hirondelle*, with the *Bonnet Rouge* in company, dropped anchor in Gibraltar, then the headquarters of Lord St. Vincent. Gaunt had found the little schooner so cruelly torn by the shot of the French guns that she was unseaworthy, and he set fire to her ; then, dividing his sadly-reduced crew betwixt the two brigs, he sailed for Cadiz, keeping anxious watch over his too numerous prisoners.

“Uncle Insects” had crept back to life again, for the bullet had only grazed his head, inflicting a severe scalp-wound. But he was a changed man ! He did not carry his chin quite so high as before, nor look down on the rest of mankind through his spectacles from so lofty a scientific eminence.

“Gaunt,” he said, as the two walked the deck side by side, “Nature was too much for me on the deck of that unhappy schooner. There’s no arguing against the blood in one’s veins. That hellish rain

of shot seemed to waken something in me quite outside the range of science. I wanted to hit back again! Then, when I saw that brave boy, with his little band of seamen, waiting for the rush of the Frenchmen, and willing to die for the flag, what could I do but join them? And," pursued "Uncle Insects," with half-ashamed energy, "I would do it again! There are elements in human nature of which my science has taken no account. I hate fighting still; but there's something for which one must fight. I found I couldn't let those Frenchmen come on board and pull down the flag without striking a blow. And all my old theories have gone to pieces," he said ruefully.

"Fighting is a bad business," said Gaunt sympathetically, "but we can't stop it till the other side agrees to stop."

"No, I suppose not. But as the realm of reason widens, war must grow rarer. The race won't for ever live on the plane of the animal. War represents the bankruptcy of religion, somewhere, and on the part of somebody."

Gaunt looked doubtful. "I find it quite possible," he said, "to fear God and keep His commandments, and yet serve my country faithfully."

"Of course, of course. Who will deny it?"

But Gaunt reflected that, a few weeks earlier, "Uncle Insects" would himself have denounced that proposition as the most stupid of heresies. He certainly *had* learned something, if it was only a little modesty in judging others.

"But the bankruptcy, both of reason and religion, is somewhere in the business, all the same," observed the scientist.

"It's the other fellows who are morally bankrupt, I suppose! And we have to thrash them into decent behaviour!"

"And poor Geoff," continued the entomologist, after a meditative pause, "brave Geoff! The gallant boy that found surrender a worse thing than death! Shall I ever forget the look on his face! While the race breeds such lads England is safe. Yes, Gaunt, your navy is, after all, a school of character; a rough school, perhaps; a school of rough virtues. But still they are virtues; and I take back all I've said against it;" and, with a curious moisture dimming his spectacles, "Uncle Insects" held out his hand to Gaunt, who took it in grateful but rather embarrassed fashion.

"I hope," he said, "there's not a middy under the flag who would have done anything else. That's our training."

"Well, it's fine training, if it does belong to an imperfect stage of human development," replied "Uncle Insects," in the tone of a scientist who was making his last concession. "Then there's poor Irene! How she will miss her sailor brother!" No one suspected Sir John of an incurable grief—a judgment which was, perhaps, somewhat unfair to that worthy knight.

On the voyage, Gaunt found himself falling into very friendly terms with the long-visaged, melancholy

lieutenant of the *Bonnet Rouge*, who had been wounded in the fight, and was slowly recovering. From him he learnt some curious details about his late captain, and how he met his fate.

“*Ah, le capitaine Giron,*” he confided. “He was *un tres bon matelot, un homme brave; mais,*”—and Lieutenant Angot’s high shoulders and curved eyebrows went up with meanings beyond the power of words to express.

He narrated how, when the *Hirondelle* was sighted, bearing down, a tall pile of bellying canvas, towards the fight, Captain Giron stared long and silently at her. He recognised her at once—the famous brig he had lost, and won, and lost again, and which had played such a part in his career.

“The *Hirondelle,*” he muttered; “it is fate!”

Some premonition of death seemed at that moment to fall on him. He turned to his first officer with a look on his broad, audacious features which Lieutenant Angot had never seen there before.

“*C’est la fortune!* That brig brings death to me.” Then his head fell; he muttered something about “*ce jeune Anglais*: I knew it when we threw him overboard . . . the look in his eyes”—and Captain Giron for a moment covered his own eyes.

He was thinking of the gallant youth, Gaunt’s second in command when the brig was recaptured, and whose unhappy fate had filled Gaunt with long-enduring fury. Presently Captain Giron lifted his face, and looked at the menacing vision of the *Hirondelle*.

"Yes, fate comes with her! Whoever comes out of this fight, *mon camarade*," he said gloomily, "I shall not." Then his face flushed; he looked round with kindling eyes.

"But France! Yes, *la belle France*." Then he turned swiftly away. This curious mood was gone; he was the stern, quick-eyed, quick-witted commander once more, till the flying fragment of the wheel ended his career.

Captain Giron thus went into his latest fight knowing it was his latest, and haunted by the vision of the gallant English lad whom he had brought to an end so dark. And yet he bore himself like a brave man.

"There was good stuff in the Frenchman," Gaunt admitted to himself, half grudgingly and half admiringly.

Meanwhile the weather was clear, the wind favourable, and the run was without incident. Gaunt's ill-luck seemed to have exhausted itself. But it was with a heavy heart he rowed to the flagship to report himself, and deliver his despatches.

"Well, Gaunt," was the admiral's greeting. "You have brought us a prize, and a very fine brig she looks. You are a lucky fellow."

"'Lucky,' sir!" said Gaunt; and something in his tone made St. Vincent glance sharply at him. The once clear features were haggard; there were deep lines on the frank brow.

"Yes, sir," Gaunt went on, answering the unspoken question in the admiral's shrewd eyes; "I fear you will think I deserve to be court-martialled."

“Well, what is it? Tell your tale,” said the admiral briefly.

“Here is my official report, sir.”

“Tell me the story yourself,” said St. Vincent irritably.

Gaunt told the story quietly, softening no detail which told against himself. His fatal mistake was to have left the brig in charge of a junior officer, on the coast of Jamaica; that made possible the robbery, and St. Vincent frowned blackly at this stage of the narrative. But he listened without comment till the story was ended, his chin sunk on his breast, his shrewd yet not unkindly eyes fastened on Gaunt's face. He did not speak for a minute after Gaunt had finished.

“You are a lucky fellow, Gaunt, still, in spite of all you tell me; an amazingly lucky fellow! The loss of your despatches, under such circumstances, might well have cost you your ship, and I suppose that Jamaica merchant would have had an action against you for his money. But you have recovered what you lost; you stumbled on a fat prize, and you managed that business with the privateers in a clever enough fashion. Two brigs and a schooner! That is a bit of work to be proud of,” he said, getting up. “Any man in the service might be proud of it. It does honour to the flag! Young Litton's death is a pity, but I will write to Sir John myself; and I'll put the lad's name in my despatch;” and St. Vincent sat down again, as if the whole business was satisfactorily ended.

The expenditure of a middy was not likely to cause long-enduring grief to any admiral, least of all to one of St. Vincent's toughness. But Gaunt felt that this summing-up chilled him.

"And Master Giron," St. Vincent went on, with a chuckle, "is done with at last. Third time's lucky! Well, it has been a pretty duel; but I thought you would get the better of him. And it is a happy thing for the West India trade that such a wasp has been killed."

As Gaunt left the cabin he realised that he was indeed a lucky fellow. He had escaped without even a censure! He had to write to Sir John and to Irene, and tell the tale of Litton's death; and, curiously enough, he found the first task harder than the second. In matters of sentiment men are afflicted with an incurable shyness towards each other. They move in that unaccustomed realm very awkwardly; its language is a foreign tongue on their lips.

In writing to Irene, however, Gaunt forgot himself; he forgot, for the moment, even his own unforgettable love, in his eagerness to comfort the sister, and to tell her everything about the dead lad which could comfort her. Sir John, he knew, would find a not inadequate solace for his grief in the honour of seeing his son's name mentioned in despatches and in Lord St. Vincent's letter; but Irene's grief would be of another and deeper quality.

Some months of quiet service followed, for adventures do not happen every twenty-four hours, even

in the stirring times of a great war. Gaunt was kept busily employed in calling up the scattered sections of St. Vincent's command; for Admiral Bruix, with twenty-five ships of the line and some frigates, had broken out of Brest, and was launched on some disquieting and unguessed enterprise. He was supposed, at first, to be threatening Ireland; but later, his ships were seen running before a gale, past Cadiz, towards the straits. He might be bent on reopening communications with Egypt, where a French army was stranded; or he might raise all the blockades in the Mediterranean, and St. Vincent was energetically calling up his scattered detachments.

So quick-footed a ship as the *Hirondelle*, at such a time, was naturally kept busy on one sea-errand after another; and yet Gaunt was conscious of the tedium of the service to a degree that surprised himself. Somehow, the loss sustained in the desperate fight with the privateers had made the *Hirondelle* itself distasteful to him; though he would not have confessed the circumstance to his dearest friend. Certainly, much of his pride in his brig had been killed. He missed Litton's bright young life every day; Johnson's big figure, too, had left a blank; half of the old crew had been killed or invalided.

The brig ran into Gibraltar with despatches from Minorca early one morning, and on boarding the flagship Gaunt was told the Admiral would see him later in the day.

St. Vincent received him in his usual grim fashion, but there was a pleasant twinkle in his eyes.

"Gaunt," he said, after the business of the despatches was over, "the captain of the *Astrea* is invalided home, and I think you have earned your promotion. She is a decent 28-gun frigate, and you shall have your step. I'll give you an acting order. The Admiralty may not confirm it, of course; and," he added, with a dry smile, "Admiral Mann is one of the Board now. He has been vice-admiral of the red, and now he is admiral of the blue. It is easier to win these things on the back-stairs of the Admiralty than off an enemy's port. He may have something to say about your commission! You must take your chance of that. I am sending the *Astrea* home; she will carry despatches, and you can see the Third Lord for yourself."

Gaunt stammered out his thanks, to which St. Vincent listened with a half-humorous impatience.

"We have taken over the *Bonnet Rouge*," he said; "she is a very fine brig, and the report on her shows she is as sound as the day she was launched. Fraser shall have command of her, and Cuthbert, of the *Barfleur*, will take command of the *Hirondelle*. A smart ship wants a smart captain; and if he does as well as you, Gaunt," said St. Vincent, with one of his rare smiles, "I shall be content."

Gaunt almost felt as if that word of praise from the admiral's granite lips was sweeter than even his newly announced promotion. He left the admiral's cabin in a whirl of mingled feelings. The epaulette was on his other shoulder now; and that seemed to make the distance that separated him from Irene a

little less star-like and hopeless. He had, he knew, done good service in the *Hirondelle*, and had earned his promotion. But to earn promotion, and to get it, were very different things! There were scores of officers with services as good as his to their record, on whom fell no gleam of favour; and the loss of his despatches on the Jamaica coast might well have postponed his own promotion for years.

"Fraser," he said to his second in command, on returning to the brig, "I am to leave the *Hirondelle*! Yes; the old man has given me the *Astrea*. She is little better than a tub; but she is a frigate by rating. I am sorry to leave the brig, but it is promotion; and big promotion. And, old fellow!" he went on, putting his hand on Fraser's shoulder, "you are to have the *Bonnet Rouge*. And if ever a fellow deserved promotion, you do."

Fraser's face flushed with delight.

"Thank you, sir! But the men will be sorry to part with you."

"Well, I suppose they will. But not many of the old crew are left, and I don't mind confessing now that the brig itself is haunted, for me, with painful memories. I am glad of the change."

Gaunt found that the *Astrea* was a frigate of the old type—short-bodied, high-nosed, bluff-bowed, as unsinkable as a bottle, and about as weatherly. It would take a three-quarters gale to get eight knots an hour out of her. She was to the *Hirondelle* as a cart-horse to a racer. There would be no weathering on one of those sea-wolves—a fast priva-

teer—with such short sticks, and a hull so heavy. It was impossible to feel any pride in such a tub.

A good seaman has a pious charity for the faults of his ship; he will not admit that they are "faults." They are only eccentricities! Johnson had once thrashed a young seaman for suggesting that the *Hirondelle* tumbled home perhaps a thought too much at the fore-chains; but he admitted confidentially, and almost with tears, to Litton afterwards, that sometimes, in his gloomy moments, he had thought so himself.

"But what business," he asked indignantly, "had the fool to say so? Especially when some chaps from the flagship's boat were on board."

A good sailor, Johnson plainly held, ought no more to talk publicly of the defects of his ship than he would of the faults of his mother. But Gaunt found that, to a degree which surprised himself, and which he would have shrunk from confessing, he had grown impatient of the *Hirondelle*. Yet, as he stood on the quarter-deck of the *Astrea*, he realised that any pride or interest in his new ship was impossible. He trod her planks with as little of personal interest as though he were only a passenger; and this, he knew, was a very evil mood for the *Astrea's* captain!

But Gaunt's heart was turned towards England. And all England, for him, was resolved into a girl's face. On that face was written his destiny; and he was impatient to read the inscription, good or evil, for him written there.

The *Astrea* reached Portsmouth without incident,

the frigate was promptly ordered into dock, and Gaunt was curtly told by the port admiral to carry his own despatches to London. And the Littons, Gaunt knew, were at that moment in London.

He lost no time on the road, and, on delivering his despatches, was told that the admiral would see him the next day.

At two o'clock, when he was shown into the room, he found a tall figure bent over some papers at the great table. It was Admiral Mann! The black hair was yet more frostily tipped with white; deeper lines were scribbled over his face; a look of fretting care was on his brow. It was not an ignoble face, but nervous and irritable, and Gaunt felt—or imagined—that beneath that furrowed brow and those twitching eyebrows, eyes looked out with a very unfriendly aspect towards him.

Mann gave no sign of recognition, but greeted Gaunt with a sort of chill civility, a politeness that had the smoothness—and the temperature—of ice. The formal business was quickly transacted, and Gaunt was about to take his leave.

“Stay a moment, Commander Gaunt,” said Mann. “We last met on the *Windsor Castle*, off Cape St. Vincent, did we not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The brig you commanded—what was her name?—the *Hirondelle*—she parted company without orders?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And she did not rejoin?”

"No, sir."

"I don't remember any rough weather that would explain that circumstance."

"No, sir. I can't pretend it was the weather."

"Yet you had my orders to keep company," said Mann, with a frown.

"Yes, sir. But I had Sir John Jervis' orders to rejoin him."

"But I was your superior officer at that moment; and my orders overrode any previous instructions you might have had."

"Yes, sir; but I knew the admiral was expecting me in San Fiorenzo, and he was running a great risk in faith on the news which I might bring him."

"But a good officer has to obey orders, and not to set up his judgment against that of his commanding officer. And you risked your brig by taking her back into the Mediterranean, as affairs stood at that moment."

"But Sir John Jervis was risking his fleet there too."

"Who cares about risk?" said Mann, rising. "It is a matter of duty. And it takes more courage sometimes to shun a peril than to run into it."

"I had to interpret my duty, sir, and it seemed to me I ought to go back. I may have been wrong; I knew I risked my commission; it may cost me it still. But if I had to go over it again, I would do just the same."

Mann looked at him steadily.

"Yes, I believe you would; and," he went on,

striking the table, "I would have done it myself! I didn't blame you! I envied you. But still, that's unofficial," he went on hurriedly, a smile lighting up his careworn and melancholy face. "If you were guilty of a fault, it was a gallant fault; though, for the matter of that, when duty is not very clear, you young fellows may always be trusted to decide on that form of it which takes you in the direction of the nearest fight! And don't make a mistake! We old fellows would like to do the same! Only, we have to think of something else than the chance of thrashing a Frenchman. It is a little thing to risk one's own life; there are graver interests than that;" and Mann fell back into a moody and abstracted silence which Gaunt did not venture to interrupt.

He was evidently on the quarter-deck of the *Windsor Castle*, and off Cape St. Vincent once more, going over again the great debate as to which way duty pointed; a debate which, in his case, ended in a decision which darkened his career, and put an enduring cloud on his name.

The admiral looked up presently—

"No harm came of the business, as far as you were concerned; I didn't pursue the matter further at the time, and I am not going to do so now, so many months afterwards. I have kept my eye on you. You have a good record; you shall have your promotion, and you shall have a ship, too, though the *Astrea* must go out of commission. Meanwhile, we'll count that unpleasant business ended;" and, with a frank smile, he held out his hand to Gaunt.

"You must dine with me on Thursday," Mann went on. "Lady Mann has a reception afterwards, and you will meet lots of people—people it will be worth your while to know."

Gaunt could only accept; though it meant putting off his visit to the Littons for another day.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MEETING

“Paint that lilac kerchief, bound
Her soft face, her hair around ;
Tie it under the archest chin
Mockery ever ambushed in.
Let the fluttering fringes streak
All her pale, sweet-rounded cheek.
Ere the parting hour go by,
Quick, thy tablets, Memory !”

—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

THE dinner at Lady Mann's was pleasant, and not in the least formal. Many naval men were there, and Gaunt, to his surprise, found he was not quite unknown. The Service had a public opinion of its own, and men were known and judged by it ; and judged, too, with a keenness which might, in some cases, have disquieted its subjects had they become suddenly conscious of their own reputation.

The guests flowed into the reception afterwards, and Gaunt heard famous names announced, and saw some famous faces. Fair and stately dames thronged the rooms, too, and made a brilliant spectacle.

Lady Mann's reception was neutral ground, on which strange political opposites met. Gaunt's eyes were attracted by the entrance of a striking pair ;

the gentleman a tall and graceful figure, with the face of an actor, the bright, wide-open eyes telling of quick genius. It was Canning, who had just married a rich wife—hanging at that moment, with an easy air of possession, on his arm. But Gaunt had hardly time to stare at the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs; his gaze was drawn to a huge figure, with broad cheeks still ruddy under the grey hair, though the tired eyes hinted tales of dissipation. The commanding look, the easy, careless gesture of the man, marked him out from the crowd; and Gaunt listened eagerly to catch his name. It was Fox, Pitt's great rival! With him came a guest equally striking—tall, long-faced, with quick, mocking eyes that wandered restlessly over the crowd. It was Sheridan—wit, orator, actor, rake—in many respects the most brilliant man, and perhaps the saddest failure, of his day.

Two other figures presently drew Gaunt's attention by the contrast they offered to each other. One was little, prim, white-faced, his prominent cheek-bones giving his countenance a plebeian look; the other was tall and handsome, with proud eyes and haughty brow, and, though simply dressed, the very ideal of manly grace. Gaunt listened to their names as they were announced with a thrill of interest. The little thin man was Perceval—not yet Prime Minister, only Solicitor-General; his haughty-looking companion was Castlereagh, round whom at that moment eddied the hates and the triumphs bred by the struggle which carried the union of Great Britain and Ireland.

Both men were of the same age, and on both lay unseen the shadows of far-off tragedy. Twelve years later, Perceval was to die by the pistol of an assassin; yet ten years later a still darker doom waited for Castlereagh. He was to die by his own hand. But Gaunt's eyes dwelt on the two notable figures with no premonition of that coming tragedy!

Gaunt stood quietly in a corner, and watched the scene with amused interest. What a contrast betwixt the lonely quarter-deck of the *Hirondelle*, and that brilliant crowd, with its glitter of gold and lace, its gleam of snowy shoulders and shining jewels! What a contrast, too, betwixt the flaming chandeliers, the gaudily-painted ceilings of the rooms, and the silent, steadfast, star-filled heavens, which hung, night by night, over the sea, and had served as a roof to him for so many months!

While he stood and meditated, suddenly, amongst the newly arrived guests, he saw Irene; and the vision, for a moment, almost stopped the beating of his heart. She was leaning on her father's arm, and walking slowly up the great room. The slender figure—which yet, for all its slenderness, had a certain queenliness; the face, like no other in the room; the clear eyes, the pure and vivid complexion, the sensitive lips, with their mingled sweetness and humour, the crown of rich hair, in which some jewel burned—this was the picture that had haunted Gaunt's dreams for months, and now suddenly stood, translated into glowing flesh and blood, before him!

Gaunt, as he looked with eager eyes, was conscious of some subtle change in Irene. She was graver. The brow had a look of larger intelligence than of old; the lines of her countenance were firmer. Some yet richer fire seemed to shine in her eyes, and deepen the scarlet of her lips, and the soft rose-tint of her cheeks. Every other woman in the crowd looked bleached and commonplace beside her; and while her radiant beauty made Gaunt's love seem—even to himself—audacious, yet, as he looked at her, he felt a thrill of pride in the reflection that, if he had loved rashly, at least he had loved nobly.

As Gaunt stood in the shadow of his quiet corner and watched, a tall and distinguished-looking soldier, in rich uniform, came up to Irene and her father, and bowed with an air of graceful confidence. Gaunt saw the gleam of Irene's white teeth as she smiled in greeting; and he recognised the dashing soldier with a pang. It was Major Ffrench, whom he had last seen as a guest at Litton Hall, in Guernsey. He was older, and had plainly seen hard service since, and had won promotion. His left sleeve was empty, and pinned to his breast. He wore a colonel's epaulettes.

Gaunt recollected now; Major Ffrench had taken part in Abercrombie's ill-fated expedition to Holland, and had won much credit in a business which yielded credit to very few, and had been severely wounded. He looked, to-night, the ideal of a gallant soldier. That empty sleeve—how it must appeal to a woman's

imagination! And the soldierly face, too, had both distinction and strength in it. It was a face to take captive a woman's eye and a woman's fancy.

A true lover is always humble-minded; and as Gaunt watched the group, he almost gave up his last hope of winning Irene. Such a rival—and that he was a rival Gaunt could not doubt—left him hardly a chance. His sailor's coat was shabby and colourless contrasted with that glittering uniform. But Gaunt was just, even in his anger. It was not merely the question of a coat betwixt them; the soldier's face might well cast a spell on any woman's heart. And how Irene looked up to his face! With what tender eyes, again, she glanced—or Gaunt thought she glanced—at the empty sleeve! Yes; with a thrill of bitterness Gaunt surrendered, or almost surrendered, his last hope.

But in strong natures courage lives even when hope is dead! And Gaunt's courage survived! He would meet Irene; he would tell his story like a man. Love has its rights; and amongst them is, at least, the right of audience, and Gaunt would claim it. A plain tale, a seaman's tale, the girl should hear. He knew his lips were clumsy. He could not write a sonnet to his mistress' eyebrow; nor tell the tale of his love

“In rhapsodies of perfect words,
Ruled by returning kiss of rhyme.”

Plain prose must serve his turn. But Gaunt smiled grimly at his own hardihood, as he looked at the

pair—she the fairest woman, he the most brilliant man, in the room. How could he dream of carrying off a prize so rich from a rival so formidable?

"Gaunt!" cried a cheerful voice at that moment, "what are you doing here? I thought you were east of Gibraltar, or west of the Azores, and never imagined you were in a London drawing-room."

Gaunt turned; it was his old friend Steele, of the *Windsor Castle*. The epaulettes on his shoulders showed that he, like Gaunt, had won promotion, and the two young frigate captains shook hands warmly.

"Gaunt," said Steele, "your eyes are better signal flags than ever flew at an admiral's peak. A signal-middy who couldn't read them without the book would be a lubber."

"Yes," replied Gaunt, "and what signal was I flying at that moment?"

"You were looking the whole code at Miss Litton; you have done nothing else for the last half-hour. But you have got no answering signal yet."

Gaunt laughed a little uneasily.

"I know Miss Litton."

"Yes, plainly."

"Her brother was a middy on my brig."

"Well, that's not a very tender bond," broke in Steele.

"He was a gallant lad, and he died in a very gallant fashion."

"Oh yes; I remember; in that affair with the privateers in the West Indies—a splendid bit of work, Gaunt. But you weren't thinking of the

brother while you were gazing so expressively at the sister. If you know Miss Litton, however, for the honour of the flag bear down on her and carry her off from that redcoat. She's the shyest, proudest, sweetest girl in London. All our fellows, when they run up from Portsmouth, fall in love with her. Half the men of the Channel Fleet have proposed to her. She used to be kind to our cloth; but since Colonel Ffrench came on the scene, the case of the navy is hopeless."

Gaunt listened impatiently, and attempted, with imperfect success, to stop his chum's free speech.

Irene, leaning on Colonel Ffrench's arm, was at that moment passing them. Her head was softly bent, and the tall, distinguished-looking soldier was bending down to her ear. Just then she looked up and her glance fell on Gaunt. He stood silently, forgetful of all else, his eyes reading eagerly the surprise in hers; and then startled by some deeper meaning that, gaze as he might, he could not guess, which shone there.

She had stopped, her hand pressed to her bosom, while a richer colour flushed her cheeks.

She was about to speak, when Gaunt recovered himself, and bowing, said something—he hardly knew what. She put out her hand frankly, while her eyes shone.

"We knew you were in London, but did not know where you were, and I never dreamed of seeing you here to-night."

"I, too, know Captain Gaunt," said the soldier

pleasantly; "we met at the Hall long ago, and I have seen more of the sea since then, and I don't like it. But you sailors seem to thrive on it," and he looked at Gaunt's manly figure with a glance of almost unwilling admiration.

Colonel French lingered for a few moments while they chatted; then, as Irene went on talking eagerly with Gaunt, and plainly had half-forgotten him, he bowed and sauntered off. Before he went he glanced keenly at the girl's face, and, somehow, the smile died on his lips at something he read there.

"By Jove!" said Steele, who had watched the scene, "Gaunt has weathered on that soldier already. Who would have thought that grave-browed fellow could have done it! Well done, the Navy!"

Gaunt, meanwhile, wandered on by Irene's side, though what he said he hardly knew. To find himself under the magic of her eyes and the music of her voice half-bewildered him. She, however, showed no want of self-possession, and asked a hundred pleasant questions. Her father came up.

"Here is Captain Gaunt," she said; "he has been in London I don't know how long, and has never been to see us, but he is coming to see us to-morrow."

Gaunt had not said so, but he looked gratefully at Irene, and said, "Yes."

"You must tell us all about Geoffrey," she went on softly; and Gaunt wondered at the courage which enabled her to touch what must be a grief so deep.

Sir John was courteous, in his bluff fashion, and

said they would be glad to see him; he must have much to tell them. Mr. Inskip had got back safely, and had told them a great deal; but Captain Gaunt would naturally be able to tell them much more.

The hostess now came up, and claimed Irene's promise to sing. "Old Lord Inverlochy," she said laughingly, "insists on having again that Scotch song you sang for him at Lady Inverlochy's reception. You have bewitched him with it."

With a quick, parting look at Gaunt, Irene moved to the piano, and presently, with a thrill of pleasure so keen that it almost became a pain, Gaunt heard her voice rise, low and sweet, and with the clearness of a bird's song in it. It stole through the room, it filled every ear; it deepened till it somehow touched every heart. But, as Gaunt listened, the song stirred some mysterious chord of recollection. Where had he heard it before? Why did it seem charged with an unutterable pathos?

Then he remembered! She was singing "Lochaber no more;" he heard that song last sung by the dying seaman, as the boats crept back in the night, defeated, from the attack on *La Mulette*. Gaunt shut his eyes, and all the scene came back; the gloomy sea, the black sky, the sighing wind, the boats full of the wounded and the dead, and that song, the lament of the dying sailor, filling night and sea with its sorrow. And now another voice, in another and strangely different scene, was pouring on the air the lament of that song.

There are strange and ironic contrasts in human

life. But that he should hear that song again, at such a moment, and from Irene's lips, seemed to poor Gaunt, who had his share of a sailor's simple-minded superstitions, a very disquieting omen. The song recalled one defeat; was it prophetic of another?

But presently, beneath the magic of Irene's voice, Gaunt forgot his superstitions. He had heard her sing before, but her song now was a revelation. This girl, he confessed to himself, half-angrily, had yet another spell to subdue him. Her glance thrilled him; the look of her face had some strange power, as if born of magic, over him; now her voice stole in through his senses to his very soul, and took him captive. He was a strong and resolute man; but, almost with a touch of self-scorn, he confessed to himself that he was defenceless before this slender girl.

Irene sat that night, with pensive brow, in her room, and recalled every detail of the meeting with Gaunt. His face, as she caught sight of it in the crowd, had strangely affected her. It recalled the first time she had seen it, in the shadow of the great chestnut tree, on the other side of the Guernsey brook. There was an aspect of command in it which she half-resented. The eyes, almost stern in their steadiness, were fixed on her with a gaze which she felt as a challenge. They had a compelling power which half-frightened her. No other pair of eyes affected her like these.

As she dwelt, in shy maiden fashion, on the face and the look, somehow her head dropped; a soft

flush kindled in her cheeks and crept to her brow. How came that sunbrowned face, with its grave brows, and the keen eyes beneath them, to disturb her so ?

Gaunt would have been amazed had he known the persistency with which his face thrust itself into Irene's imagination, the aspect it wore there, and the feelings it stirred !

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN PORT

“Her soul’s mine: and thus, grown perfect,
I shall pass my life’s remainder.
Life will just hold out the proving
Both our powers, alone and blended:
And then, come next life quickly!
This world’s use will have been ended.”

—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

LADY LITTON was not in London, Gaunt was told when he called at Sir John’s residence next day, but Miss Litton was in, and would see him.

He sat in the drawing-room, waiting for Irene with little of cheerful hope, but with a good deal of very obstinate purpose. He might not win her; such miraculous good luck, he said to himself, was well-nigh impossible, as it was certainly undeserved. But he would tell his tale, and he knew she must listen. Love such as his, he said to himself over and over again, had at least the right to be heard. And he was proud of his love, even while he almost despaired of his success. If she refused him he would still, and to the end of his days, be proud that he had loved a woman so fair and noble. If

she sent him away, he would go mateless, he was sure, to the end of his life; but better that than never to have known her. Speech should not fail him, nor purpose. Here was a lover with not much hope, but with a surprising amount of courage.

Then he heard her step coming. It lingered a moment at the door, and in that pause Gaunt could almost hear the pulses of his heart beating. The sound of that arrested step, somehow, gave him hope. Why did she linger?

She came into the room with her head bent, and walked almost timidly towards him as he rose. When their hands met, Gaunt felt the soft fingers tremble in his grasp, and that shy flutter sent, he hardly knew why, a wave of hope through his blood. She lifted her face, and he saw, with wonder, that the sensitive lips were quivering. Her eyes shrank before the eager challenge in his.

"Miss Litton," he was saying—"Irene——" but then speech somehow failed him. In such a moment and mood it was too clumsy a vehicle for thought and feeling. Something subtler and quicker took its office. Their eyes met again, with strange meanings—eager challenge and shy response—in them.

"Yes," he said, "I have waited for two years to tell you again I love you. I need you! I think you are the fairest creature God ever made; and if I can win you——"

Now, Irene had entered the room, somehow, knowing perfectly what Gaunt's first word would be and

almost fearing his masterful speech. She armed herself against him—and against herself, too—with the shield of a girl's playful speech and quick wit. Her spirit was both shy and proud, in spite of all its gaiety, and she meant to keep him at a distance.

But one thing she had not reckoned on—her own heart! It turned—almost to her own amazement—an utter traitor. It surrendered to the touch of Gaunt's hands and the look of his face.

As Gaunt went on in hurried and stumbling sentences, she looked into his eyes, with their frank directness and earnestness; then she did a surprising thing. She laughed, a low, sweet, thrilling, tender laugh!

Lovers' ears are sometimes dull, and masculine wit, at such a moment, is apt to blunder. Gaunt heard the laugh, and stared at her with a touch of amazed anger. Irene caught the sudden look of puzzled indignation in his eyes, and she laughed afresh.

But Gaunt saw her tell-tale lips were quivering. Her eyes betrayed her. They gave up the secret of her heart to the passion of his. There was love in them, newly awakened to self-consciousness; love shy and tender, but frank. And, with that, Gaunt made no more ado, but simply took her in his arms and kissed her hair and eyes and lips, till she broke away, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes and ruffled hair—the most dainty, charming, tempting maiden that ever lover kissed and hungered to kiss again.

“Irene,” stammered Gaunt, alarmed at his own audacity—“I never meant——” Then he stopped, and both laughed, with love and happiness in every cadence. Gaunt took possession of his mistress’ hand—of both her hands, if truth must be told—and punctuated his talk with kisses on them.

To record that talk would be a clumsy sacrilege. Gaunt presently wanted to know when Irene loved him first, as if a girl’s love had any articulate chronology, and could be dated like an almanac! His own love for her, he vowed, was dateless. It began before he saw her face! “How could that be?” she asked, with wondering eyes.

“When I heard your voice mocking the lark!” he cried, and at that Irene’s cheeks flamed afresh.

But his love was older than even that, Gaunt protested. God made them for each other; at least He made him—Harry Gaunt—to love her—Irene Litton; and for his part he proposed to fulfil the whole duty of man—of this particular man—with pious fidelity. So they talked and laughed, as only they can who frankly love, and are happy in their love.

Then the talk took a graver note. Gaunt remembered Litton, and blamed himself for his selfishness in talking of his own love before remembering Irene’s grief.

“I thought——” he said, “I feared you would never forgive me for the dear lad’s death.”

“But,” said Irene, “I——” she hesitated, she was going to say “loved you”; but a girl’s lips are coy

in the early stages of affection, at least, in talking of her love. However, Gaunt's hands held hers, and the touch thrilled her, and she went on, with hushed voice—

"I loved you long before that, I think, though I would not confess it to myself; but certainly I loved you the more for what you did for Geoffrey. Yes," she said, replying to Gaunt's look of wonder, "his letters told us more than you perhaps guessed," she said. "You helped my brother to be Christ's lad. You taught him not to be ashamed of religion. And oh! it makes all the difference, now he is gone; it takes the bitterness from his death. No darkness lies on his memory. He is our lad still, and for ever."

Gaunt listened in wonder. Yes, it was true he had tried, in elder-brother fashion, to keep the lad right. His own piety was of the frankest, simplest character; it has been already described in these pages as being—like that of a more famous sailor than Gaunt—Ken's "Evening Hymn" translated into conduct. Such religion as Gaunt had did not exhale in sermons; yet he knew he had talked sometimes to the lad about the graver aspects of life and duty.

He was really unconscious, however, of the influence he had over the boy. He was a hero in Litton's eyes; and the lad delighted to describe his hero's doings to his sister, and to report his sayings, and Irene could thus trace Gaunt's influence on her brother. She took a bundle of his letters from her desk, opened them, and proceeded

to question Gaunt as to his recollection of things Litton reported.

Irene—to give only one example—produced a record of a midnight talk on the quarter-deck of the *Hirondelle*, and it all came back to Gaunt's recollection. As Gaunt came on deck that night, the boy was looking up pensively to the amazing dome of the star-crowded heavens, in whose depths great flocks of fleecy clouds were drifting,

“Shepherded by the slow, unwilling wind.”

Gaunt stood for a moment beside the lad.

“Ah, Litton; what captain steers those fleets of clouds, and of stars? Some fools pretend to doubt whether there is a God. Why, there He is at work before our eyes! They taught you to pray at home, Litton; you don't forget the teaching here?”

“No, sir,” replied Litton soberly.

“That's well,” said his captain, with a smile which the letter in Irene's hand proved the boy long remembered.

With a humbled wonder, Gaunt found his words reproduced here, and they seemed to gain strength and pathos from the touch of the dead boy's hand.

“You wouldn't play the coward before a Frenchman, Litton. Don't play the coward before anything base or evil. We ought to love the best we know, and Who is that best”—with a gesture to the midnight sky—“but God? A man ought to be shot if he isn't loyal to the flag. The worst of all treasons is disloyalty to Jesus Christ.”

Gaunt sat and wondered at the resurrection of words spoken so long ago, words forgotten by the speaker, and which reached him again from the hand of a dead boy, and through the lips he loved best in the world. Time brings strange resurrections for our good words, as well as our bad ones!

Sir John Litton at this moment came in, and with him, "Uncle Insects." Sir John stared at the lovers with open-eyed amazement; "Uncle Insects" beamed on them through the twin moons of his spectacles, with a kindliness not unflavoured by a touch of satirical humour. The pair sat side by side, with an unashamed closeness which was eloquent.

"Well, Captain Gaunt," said "Uncle Insects," "these are pleasanter conditions than could be found on the deck of your brig."

Gaunt got up immediately, with a sailor's frankness—

"Sir John, I have asked Miss Litton to be my wife, and she has consented."

"Well," replied Sir John, with a queer smile, "if my daughter has made up her mind, nothing more is to be said. A father's office counts for little when the lover arrives on the scene."

Irene ran to her father, and caught his hand in both her own. "Don't say that, father. I'm your daughter always; always," she repeated softly. "But, father——" her lips trembled, her head drooped.

"Nature," commented "Uncle Insects," in the tone of a professor expounding some great scientific

principle to his class, "Nature works by forces beyond our arithmetic, and towards ends which were not included in our little plans."

But no one listened to the platitude. Sir John was gently caressing his daughter's hand.

"This will please your mother: and it doesn't displease me. Gaunt," he went on, "I know you better than I did three years ago, and I have learned some lessons myself, and we can frankly give you a place in the family."

"Well, sir, you have lost a son. Nobody can take that dear lad's place. But if you will let me try, I will give you a son's respect and affection."

"Eating one's own words is an unpleasant diet," broke in "Uncle Insects" as a sort of chorus, "but a wise man knows when the process is inevitable. And, Gaunt, I'll forgive you the colour of your jacket! I wish your profession didn't exist," he grumbled; "but since it must, I'll rail against it no more."

"Well, Inskip," said Sir John, with a laugh, "you used a good cutlass yourself on the deck of that schooner, according to your own version."

"Yes," replied "Uncle Insects," with a sigh and a shudder, "Nature was too much for my science then."

"It was a gallant thing, of which any man might be proud," said Gaunt.

"At all events, it has supplied all Inskip's opponents with a perpetual joke at his expense," observed Sir John, who, with an Englishman's

invincible hate of sentiment, was glad to bring the talk down to a safe level.

But Irene drew Gaunt aside, and asked, with a saucy glance, "That was a pretty speech to my father, sir. Does it mean that you will be my brother? Is that part of the arrangement?"

But her eyes fell before the glow and fire in those of her lover!

THE END

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