HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

ONE OF THE 28TH: A TALE OF WATERLOO

George Henty
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PREFACE

Although in the present story a boy plays the principal part, and encounters many adventures by land and sea, a woman is the real heroine, and the part she played demanded an amount of nerve and courage fully equal to that necessary for those who take part in active warfare. Boys are rather apt to think, mistakenly, that their sex has a monopoly of courage, but I believe that in moments of great peril women are to the full as brave and as collected as men. Indeed, my own somewhat extensive experience leads me to go even further, and to assert that among a civil population, untrained to arms, the average woman is cooler and more courageous than the average man. Women are nervous about little matters; they may be frightened at a mouse or at a spider; but in the presence of real danger, when shells are bursting in the streets, and rifle bullets flying thickly, I have seen them standing kitting at their doors and talking to their friends across the street when not a single man was to be seen.

There is no greater mistake than to think women cowards

because they are sometimes nervous over trifles. Were it necessary, innumerable cases could be quoted from history to prove that women can, upon occasion, fight as courageously as men. Cæsar found that the women of the German tribes could fight bravely side by side with the men, and the Amazons of the King of Dahomey are more feared by the neighboring tribes than are his male soldiers. Almost every siege has its female heroines, and in the Dutch War of Independence the female companies at Sluys and Haarlem proved themselves a match for the best soldiers of Spain. Above all, in patient endurance of pain and suffering, women are immeasurably superior to men. I emphasize this point because I know that many boys, simply because they are stronger than girls, are apt to regard them with a sort of contempt, and to fancy themselves without the least justification, not only stronger but braver and more courageous —in fact superior beings in every way.

G. A. HENTY.

One of the 28th

CHAPTER I.
UNEXPECTED NEWS

"I have written to ask Ralph Conway to come and stay for a time with me." The announcement was a simple one, but it fell like a bombshell in the midst of the party at breakfast at Penfold Hall. The party consisted only of the speaker, Herbert Penfold, and his two sisters. The latter both exclaimed "Herbert!" in a tone of shocked surprise. Mr. Penfold was evidently prepared for disapprobation; he had spoken in a somewhat nervous tone, but with a decision quite unusual to him. He had finished his last piece of toast and emptied his last cup of tea before making the announcement, and he now pushed back his chair, rose to his feet, and said: "Yes; I have been thinking of having him here for some time, and I suppose that as master of this house I am at liberty to ask whom I like; at any rate I would rather have no discussion on the subject."

So saying, without giving his sisters time to reply, he walked hastily to the door and went out. Miss Penfold and Miss Eleanor Penfold gazed at each other in speechless astonishment. So accustomed were they to settle everything that took place at

Penfold Hall, that this sudden assumption of authority on the part of their brother fairly staggered them. Miss Penfold was the first to speak:

"This is terrible, Eleanor! To think that after all these years Herbert's thoughts should still be turning toward that woman. But it is only what might be expected. The ingratitude of men is terrible. Here we have for the last twenty years been devoting our lives to him—not only keeping his house for him, but seeing that he did not fall a victim to any of the designing women who would have insinuated themselves into his good graces, and preventing him from indulging in all sorts of foolish tastes and bringing himself to ruin; and now you see he turns again to that artful woman, and, without saying a word to us, invites her son to come here. It is monstrous, sister!"

"It is monstrous," Miss Eleanor Penfold repeated, with tears in her eyes. "It is like flying in the face of Providence, sister."

"It is flying in our faces," Miss Penfold replied sharply; "and just at the present moment that is of more importance. To think that that man must have been brooding over this, and making up his mind to act in this way for weeks perhaps, and never to say a word to us upon the subject. I wonder he didn't ask the woman herself down!"

"He never could have done such a shameless thing, Charlotte," her sister said much shocked. "Of course, we must have left the house instantly."

"I should not have left the house," Miss Penfold said firmly.

"If the woman comes—and now he has asked the boy it is quite possible that he may ask the mother—our duty will be to remain here. You know we have been uneasy ever since her husband died. Herbert's infatuation concerning her has been pitiable, and we have always believed it has been that alone which has caused him to refuse so obstinately to enter into our plans, or to pay even decent courtesy to the various excellent young women we have from time to time asked down here, and who were in every way suitable for the position of mistress of this house—women full of sense, and who, with right guidance, would have made him perfectly happy. And now he flies in our faces and asks the boy down. I have had an idea for some little time that he has had something on his mind; he has been more nervous and fidgety than usual, and several times he has seemed to be on the point of saying something, and then changed his mind. Of course, one can understand it all now. No wonder he was ashamed to look us in the face when he was meditating such a step as this. The duplicity of man is something shocking!"

It was not surprising that Herbert Penfold's sudden assertion of his will was a shock to his sisters. These ladies had so long been accustomed to rule absolutely at Penfold Hall that Mr. Penfold's assertion of his right to act as he pleased in his own house came upon them like an act of absolute rebellion. At their father's death they were women of twenty-seven and twenty-six years old respectively. Herbert was a lad of sixteen. He was of a gentle and yielding disposition; and as their father for some years

previous to his death had been a confirmed invalid, and they had had the complete management of the house, it was but natural that at his death they should continue in the same position.

Owing to weak health, Herbert had not been sent to school, but had been educated under the care of a tutor. He had wished when he reached the age of nineteen to enter one of the universities; but his sisters had been so opposed to the idea, and had represented so strongly to him his unfitness to take part in the rough sports of the young men, and how completely he would feel out of place in such companionship, that he had abandoned the idea, and had traveled on the Continent for three years with his tutor, his sisters being for most of the time of the party. Soon after his return he had fallen in love with the daughter of Colonel Vernon, an officer living on half-pay at Poole, which was the nearest town to Penfold Hall. The announcement of his engagement came like a thunder-clap upon his sisters, who had agreed that it would be in all respects desirable that Herbert should not marry for some years.

They had, however, been wise enough not to offer any open opposition to the match. Three months later the engagement was broken off. How it came about no one exactly knew. Unpleasant reports were set on foot; there were misunderstandings which should easily have been cleared up, but which grew until they gave rise to serious quarrels. Letters which might have set matters straight somehow failed to come to hand; and so at last things went from bad to worse until there was a final quarrel, a return of

letters and presents on both sides, and a final breaking off of the engagement. A year later Mary Vernon married Mr. Conway, an architect, resident in London.

Mr. Penfold had before this become convinced that Mary Vernon had not been to blame in the matter, and that he had in some way or other taken an altogether mistaken view of the subject. He knew by the comments of such friends as were intimate enough to speak, and the coolness of many others, that he was considered to have behaved very badly toward her. And this thought was a most distressing one, for he was deeply attached to Mary; and had he not been convinced that from some reason or other she herself had ceased to care for him, and was anxious to break off the engagement, he would have gone any length towards healing the breach. When it was too late he bitterly regretted his own weakness in submitting to the domination of his sisters, and felt a deep though silent resentment against them for the share that he was convinced they had taken in causing the breach between himself and Mary Vernon; but although he resented, he had neither the will nor firmness to free himself from their domination.

At times he struggled feebly against it; and on two or three occasions had suddenly gone up to town, and thence on to the Continent, and had traveled there for weeks. On one of these occasions he had written to them saying that he thought it would be for the happiness of them all if they were to leave Penfold Hall and set up an establishment of their own. But upon his return he

found things going on exactly as before, and Miss Penfold had spoken somewhat severely of the silly letter he had written to them, a letter displaying at once such ingratitude and folly that it had been beneath them to notice it. As Herbert Penfold was in a way really fond of his sisters, who spared no effort in making his home comfortable for him, and who allowed him to have his own way in all minor matters, he could not bring himself to repeat when face to face with them the opinion he had expressed in writing; and so things had gone on for years.

The Miss Penfolds were really anxious to see their brother married. Provided only that it was to a lady who would be, in their estimation, fitted for him, and who would also have a feeling of gratitude towards themselves for their share in installing her as mistress of the Hall, they were quite prepared to abdicate in her favor, and to retire to some pretty house near a pleasant watering-place, paying visits once or twice a year to the Hall.

The listless life their brother led was a source of grief to them; for they were really attached to him, and believed that they had in every way been working for his happiness.

They had no shadow of regret for the part they had played in breaking off his engagement with Mary Vernon. Having once convinced themselves that she was a frivolous girl, quite unsuited for the position of mistress of Penfold Hall, they had regarded it as an absolute duty to protect Herbert from the consequences of what they considered his infatuation. Consequently, for years they were in the habit of inviting for long visits young ladies

whom they considered in every way eligible as their successor, and had been much grieved at their want of success, and at the absolute indifference with which Herbert regarded the presence of these young women. When, four years after his marriage to Mary Vernon, Mr. Conway had died suddenly they had been seized with a vague disquiet; for they believed that the remembrance of his first love was the real cause of Herbert's indifference to others, and considered it probable he might still be sufficiently infatuated with her to attempt to undo the past.

To their gratification Herbert never alluded to the subject, never, so far as they knew, made the slightest effort to renew her acquaintance. In fact, Herbert Penfold was a diffident as well as a weak man. Once convinced that he had acted badly toward Mary Vernon, he was equally convinced that she must despise him and that he was utterly unworthy of her. Had it been otherwise he would have again entered the lists and tried to recover the love he had thrown away.

Although he occasionally yielded to the entreaties of his sisters and showed himself with them at county gatherings, gave stately dinner-parties at regular intervals, and accepted the invitations of his neighbors, he lived the life almost of a recluse.

His sole companion and friend was the rector of the parish, who had been his tutor during his Continental tour, and whom he had presented with the living which was in his gift, to the secret dissatisfaction of his sisters, who had always considered that Herbert's tutor had endeavored to set him against them. This

had to some extent been the case, in so far, at least, that Mr. Withers, who had left college only a short time before starting with Herbert, had endeavored to give him habits of self-reliance and independence of thought, and had quietly striven against the influence that his sisters had upon his mind. It was not until after the Mary Vernon episode that the living had fallen vacant; had it been otherwise things might have turned out differently, for Herbert would certainly have sought his friend's advice in his troubles.

After that it was too late for his interference. Mr. Withers had watched the state of matters at the Hall, and his young wife had often urged him to try to induce Herbert Penfold to rouse himself and assert himself against his sisters, but the vicar remained neutral. He saw that though at times Herbert was a little impatient at the domination of his sisters, and a chance word showed that he nourished a feeling of resentment toward them, he was actually incapable of nerving himself to the necessary effort required to shake off their influence altogether, and to request them to leave the Hall.

Nothing short of this would suffice to establish his independence; for after a mere temporary assertion of authority he would, if they remained there, assuredly speedily allow affairs to lapse into their present state, and the vicar thought that harm rather than good would be caused by his interference, and that, as his influence would be sure to be suspected, there would be a breach between the Hall and the Rectory. As it was the

connection was an intimate one. Herbert was always glad to see him when he came in for a talk in the course of his rounds, or when he and his wife would come up to dine quietly. The Miss Penfolds were always ready with their purses to aid him to carry out his schemes for the good of the parish, and to sympathize with his young wife in her troubles; for of these she had a large share—all her children, save one girl, having been carried off in their infancy.

Mabel Withers was as much at home at the Hall as at the Rectory. She was chief pet and favorite with Mr. Penfold; and although his sisters considered that the rector allowed her to run wild, and that under such license she was growing up a sad tomboy, they could not withstand the influence of the child's happy and fearless disposition, and were in their way very kind to her.

Such was the state of things at Penfold Hall when its owner's sudden announcement that he had invited young Ralph Conway to come to stay there had fallen like a bombshell upon his sisters.

The invitation had caused almost as much surprise to Mrs. Conway as to the Miss Penfolds. Her father had died a few months after her marriage, and at the death of her husband she found herself left with an income of about a hundred a year—the interest of the sum for which he had insured his life.

To her surprise she had a month or two later received an intimation from the lawyer who managed her business that a friend had arranged to pay the sum of a hundred pounds every

quarter to her account, on condition only that no inquiry whatever should be made as to his or her identity. Mary Conway had thankfully accepted the gift, which had, however, caused her intense wonderment and curiosity. So far as she knew neither her father nor her husband had any relations who could have afforded so handsome a gift. She knew that Colonel Vernon had been most popular with his regiment, and the supposition at which she finally arrived was that some young officer whom he had befriended in difficulties had, on coming into a large property, determined similarly to befriend the daughter of his former colonel.

Had she been alone in the world she would have declined to accept this aid from an unknown benefactor, but for her son's sake she felt that it would be wrong to do so. The idea that the money might come from Herbert Penfold had once or twice occurred to her, only to be at once dismissed, for had she really believed that it came from him she could not, even for Ralph's sake, have accepted it. He had, as she believed, quarreled with her altogether without cause, her letters had been unanswered, and she considered the quarrel to have been simply a pretext upon the part of Herbert to break off an engagement of which he was tired. Words dropped, apparently by accident, by Herbert's sisters had, before the misunderstanding commenced, favored this idea, and although she had really loved him her disposition was too spirited to allow her to take the steps she otherwise might have done to set herself right with him.

At any rate she had no ground whatever for believing that Herbert, after the breach of the engagement, entertained any such feelings toward her as would have led him to come forward to assist her in any way after she had become the wife of another; and so for twelve years she had continued to receive her quarterly income. She had established herself in a pretty little house near Dover, where several old friends of her father resided, and where she had plenty of pleasant society among the officers of the regiments stationed there. Although far from rivaling Portsmouth or Plymouth in life and bustle, Dover was a busy town during the time of the great war. The garrison was a large one, the channel cruisers often anchored under the guns of the castle, and from the top of the hills upon a clear day for months a keen lookout was kept for the appearance from the port of Boulogne of the expedition Napoleon had gathered there for the invasion of England.

The white sails of the English cruisers as they sailed up or down the channel were clearly visible, and occasionally a privateer could be seen making its way westward with a prize it had picked up off Texel. Military and naval matters were the sole topics of conversation, and by the time he was fifteen Ralph had fully determined to follow in his grandfather's footsteps and to become a soldier. Having passed almost all her life among military men Mrs. Conway had offered no objections to his wishes, and as several of her father's old friends had promised to use their influence on his behalf, there was little doubt that he

would be enabled to procure a commission as soon as he reached the regulation age.

It was not often that the postman called at Mrs. Conway's with letters; for postage was expensive, and the people in those days only wrote when they had something particular to say. Mrs. Conway had just made breakfast when Ralph came in with a letter in his hand.

"Here is a letter for you, mother; but please don't open it until you have given me my breakfast. I am very late now, and shall barely have time to get through with it and be there before the gates close."

"Your porridge is quite ready for you, Ralph; so if you are late it will be your own fault not mine. The eggs will be in before you have eaten it. However, I won't open the letter until you have gone, because you will only waste time by asking questions about it."

Ralph began his bread and milk, and Mrs. Conway, stretching out her hand, took the letter he had laid beside his plate, and turning it over glanced at the direction to ascertain from which of her few correspondents it came. For a moment she looked puzzled, then, with a little start, she laid it down by the side of her plate. She had recognized the handwriting once so familiar to her.

"What is it, mother? You look quite startled. Who is it from?"

"It is from no one you know, Ralph. I think it is from a person I have not heard from for some years. At any rate it will keep

until you are off to school."

"It's nothing unpleasant, I hope, mother. Your color has quite gone, and you look downright pale."

"What should be the matter, you silly boy?" Mrs. Conway said, with an attempt to smile. "What could there be unpleasant in a letter from a person I have not heard from for years? There, go on with your breakfast. I expect you will hear some news when you get down into the town, for the guns in the castle have been firing, and I suppose there is news of a victory. They said yesterday that a great battle was expected to be fought against Napoleon somewhere near Leipzig."

"Yes; I heard the guns, mother, and I expect there has been a victory. I hope not."

"Why do you hope not, Ralph?"

"Why, of course, mother, I don't want the French to be beaten—not regularly beaten, till I am old enough to have a share in it. Just fancy what a nuisance it would be if peace was made just as I get my commission."

"There will be plenty of time for you, Ralph," his mother said smiling. "Peace has been patched up once or twice, but it never lasts long; and after fighting for the last twenty years it is hardly probable that the world is going to grow peaceful all at once. But there, it is time for you to be off; it only wants ten minutes to nine and you will have to run fast all the way to be in time."

When Mrs. Conway was alone she took up the letter, and turned it over several times before opening it.

What could Herbert Penfold have written about after all these years? Mrs. Conway was but thirty-six years old now, and was still a pretty woman, and a sudden thought sent a flush of color to her face. "Never!" she said decidedly. "After the way in which he treated me he cannot suppose that now—" and then she stopped. "I know I did love him once, dearly, and it nearly broke my heart; but that was years and years ago. Well, let us see what he says for himself," and she broke open the letter. She glanced through it quickly, and then read it again more carefully. She was very pale now, and her lips trembled as she laid down the letter.

"So," she said to herself in a low tone, "it is to him after all I owe all this," and she looked round her pretty room; "and I never once really suspected it. I am glad now," she went on after a pause, "that I did not; for, of course, it would have been impossible to have taken it, and how different the last twelve years of my life would have been. Poor Herbert! And so he really suffered too, and he has thought of me all this time."

For fully half an hour she sat without moving, her thoughts busy with the past, then she again took up the letter and reread it several times. Its contents were as follows:

> "Dear Mrs. Conway: You will be doubtless surprised at seeing my handwriting, and your first impulse will naturally be to put this letter into the fire. I am not writing to ask you to forgive my conduct in the old days. I am but too well aware how completely I have forfeited all right to your esteem or consideration. Believe me that I have suffered for

my fault, and that my life has been a ruined one. I attempt to make no excuses. I am conscious that while others were to blame I was most of all, and that it is to my own weakness of will and lack of energy that the breach between us was due. However, all this is of the past and can now interest you but little. You have had your own sorrows and trials, at which, believe me, I sincerely grieved. And now to my object in writing to you. Although still comparatively a young man, I have not many years to live. When last in London I consulted two of the first physicians, and they agreed that, as I had already suspected, I was suffering from heart disease, or rather, perhaps, from an enfeebled state of my heart, which may at any moment cease to do its work.

"Naturally then, I have turned my thoughts as to whom I should leave my property. My sisters are amply provided for. I have no other near relatives, and therefore consider myself free to leave it as I choose. I have long fixed my thoughts upon the daughter of a dear friend, the rector of Bilston; she is now thirteen years old, and half my property is left her. I have left the other half to your son. The whole subject to an annuity to yourself; which you will not, I trust, refuse to accept. I have never thought of any woman but you, and I hope that you will not allow your just resentment against me to deprive me of the poor satisfaction of making what atonement lies in my power for the cruel wrong I formerly did you.

"Were I strong and in health I can well imagine that you would indignantly refuse to receive any benefits from my hands, but knowing your kindness of heart, I feel sure that

you will not sadden the last days of a doomed man by the knowledge that even after his death his hopes of insuring the comfort of the one woman on earth he cared for are to be disappointed.

"I should like to know your son. Would it be too much to ask you to spare him for a while from time to time so long as I live? I have a double motive, I say frankly, in thus asking him to come here. I wish him and my little pet, Mabel Withers, to come to like each other. I wish to divide my property between them, and yet I should be glad if the whole estate could remain intact.

"I should not be so foolish as to make a proviso that two persons who are as yet so young, and who may not in any way be suitable to each other, should marry, but nothing would please me so much as that they should take a fancy to each other; and thrown together as they would be here, for Mabel is constantly at the house, it is just possible that one of those boy and girl affections, which do sometimes, although perhaps rarely, culminate in marriage, might spring up between them. Whether that may be so in the present case I must leave to fate, but I should at any rate like to pave the way for such an arrangement by bringing the young people together. I need not say that it will be best that neither of them should have the slightest idea of what is in my mind, for this would be almost certain to defeat my object.

"If the proposal is agreeable to you, I hope that you will let Ralph come to me at the beginning of his holidays; which must, I fancy, be now near at hand. I think it will be as well

that he should not know of my intention as to the disposal of my property, for it is better he should think that he will have to work for his living; but at the same time there would be no harm in his knowing that it is probable I shall help him on in life. This will make him bear better what would otherwise be a dull visit. But I leave this matter entirely in your hands. You know the boy and I do not, and you can therefore better judge what will be best for him to know. And now, dear Mary, if you will pardon my once again calling you so,

"I remain,

"Your affectionate friend,

"HERBERT PENFOLD."

It was characteristic of Mrs. Conway that at the first reading of this letter she thought rather of the writer than of the bright prospects which his offer opened to her son. She thought rather of Herbert Penfold, her first love, now ill, if not dying, of the days of their engagement and its rupture, than of the fact that her son was to inherit half the Penfold estates. She had been sorely hurt at the time; and even after all these years it was a pleasure to her to know that the quarrel was not as she had often thought at the time, a mere pretext for breaking off the engagement, but that Herbert had really loved her, had cared for her all these years, and had been the mysterious friend whose kindness had so lightened her cares.

"I did not throw away my love after all," she said to herself, as with her eyes full of tears she stood at the window and looked out towards the sea. "He cared for me enough to be faithful all this

time and to think of me constantly, while I had almost forgotten the past. I ought to have known all the time that he was acting under the influence of others—those sisters of his, of course. I was always certain they hated me—hated the thought of my becoming mistress of Penfold Hall. I knew the influence they had over him. Herbert had no will of his own—it was the only fault I ever saw in him—and they could twist him round their little fingers. And now he is going to make Ralph his heir, or at least his heir with the girl he speaks of. It is a grand thing for Ralph; for the estates were worth, he told papa, eight thousand a year, and if Herbert's little romance comes off Ralph will have all."

Then she thought over the years he had been befriending her, and wondered what she should do about that. Finally, being a sensible woman, she decided to do nothing. Had she known it before, or learned the truth by other means, she would have refused absolutely to touch Herbert Penfold's money; but it would be indeed a poor return for his kindness were she now, when he was ill and feeble, and was about to bestow still further benefits upon her, to refuse to permit him any longer to aid her. She wished, as she read the letter over again, that he had expressed some desire to see her. She should have liked to have thanked him in person, to have told him how grateful she felt for his care and kindness, to have taken his hand again if but for a minute.

But he had expressed no wish for a meeting, had never all these years made an effort to see her. She could read in the wording of the letter that he had been principally deterred

from making any attempt to see her by the feeling that he had entirely forfeited her regard, and had offended her beyond chance of forgiveness. And had she been asked the day before she would doubtless have replied that she had no wish whatever ever again to meet Herbert Penfold; whereas now she felt almost aggrieved that he should express no wish to meet her, should have stayed away so long without making one effort to bring about reconciliation.

"Of all faults that a man can have," she said pettishly, "I do not think there's one so detestable as that of self-distrust. Why could he not have said ten years ago, 'I behaved badly, Mary; I treated you abominably; but forgive me and forget. I was not wholly to blame, except that I allowed others to come between us?' If he had come and said that, we could at least have been good friends. I have no patience with men who cannot stand up for themselves. Now, how much shall I tell Ralph?" and she again read the letter through.

"Ralph," she said when he came in to dinner, "you remember that letter I had this morning?"

"Yes, I know, mother; the one that made you turn so white. You said it was from an old friend, though why a letter from an old friend should upset any one I can't make out. What was it about, mother?"

"Well, my boy, it contains a pleasant piece of news. Mr. Penfold, that is the name of the writer, was a friend of my family. He knew me long ago when we were young people, and at one

time it seemed likely that we should be married. However, as you know, that never took place. However, it seems, as he says by his letter, that he has never altogether forgotten me, and he intends to help you on in life if you turn out as he would like to see you. He wishes you to go down to stay with him when your holidays begin."

"That sounds nice," Ralph said; "and if he has got any boys about my own age it will be pleasant."

"He has no children, Ralph. He is what you may call an old bachelor, and lives with his sisters—or, rather, they live with him."

"That does not sound very cheerful, mother. An old gentleman with two old ladies alone in the house can't make much fun."

"He is not an old gentleman, Ralph," Mrs. Conway said almost angrily. "I told you we were young people together. Still it may not be very lively for you, but you must put up with that. He evidently means to be very kind to you, and it will be of great advantage to you going down to stay with him."

"But what are you going to do with yourself, mother, all alone here? I think he might have asked you as well as me."

"I shall do very well, Ralph. I have plenty of friends here."

"Where does Mr. Penfold live, mother?"

"Down in Dorsetshire. It is a very nice place, and only about a mile from the sea. But, as I say, I do not expect you will find it lively; but that you mustn't mind. It will be a very good thing for you, and will be well worth your while putting up with a little

dullness for a time. Mr. Penfold is one of the kindest of men, but I do not think you will like his sisters much. Certainly you will not unless they are a good deal changed from what they were as I remember them. Still you must try to get on with them as well as you can, and I dare say you will find some pleasant companions in the neighborhood. I am sure you will do your best when I tell you that I am most anxious for many reasons that Mr. Penfold should like you."

"Of course I will do my best, mother, though I must say that the lookout is not, according to your description, a very cheerful one, and I would a deal rather stop at home with you."

"We can't always do exactly as we like, Ralph; though that is a lesson you have as yet to learn. What day did you say your holidays began?"

"Next Monday week, mother. But I do hope I may have two or three days' sailing with Joe Knight the fisherman before I go."

"Mr. Penfold says he will be glad to see you as soon as your holidays begin, Ralph; still I suppose a day or two will make no difference, so we will settle that you shall go on Friday. As you go down to school this afternoon you had better tell Rogerson the tailor to come up this evening to measure you for a suit of clothes. You must look decent when you go down; and you know except your Sunday suit, you have got nothing fit to wear in such a house as that."

"I am afraid it's going to be a horrible nuisance altogether," Ralph said ruefully. "However, I suppose it's got to be done as you

say so, mother; though it's hard breaking in on my holidays like that. He might just as well have asked me in school-time. One could have put up with it ever so much better if it took one out of old Harper's clutches for a bit. How long am I to stay there?"

"I expect the greater part of your holidays, Ralph. I think he wants to get to know all about you."

Ralph groaned loudly. "He may intend very kindly," he said; "but I wish he would keep his good intentions to himself."

"You think so now," Mrs. Conway said with a smile. "You won't think so when you are in the army, but will find a little extra allowance or a tip now and then very welcome."

"I dare say I shall, mother," Ralph said, brightening. "Anyhow, if the old gentleman—that is to say, the gentleman—takes it into his head to make me an allowance, it will take me off your hands, and I shall not be always feeling that I am an awful expense to you. All right, mother. I think I can promise that I will be on my best behavior, and will try hard to get on even with his sisters. I wish he had asked Phil Landrey to go down with me. Two fellows can get on anywhere."

"I should have very little hope of your making a good impression if you went there with your friend Phil," Mrs. Conway said, smiling. "I can believe in your good conduct while you are alone, but I should have no hopes whatever of you if you and he were together."

"But how am I to go, mother? It seems such a tremendous way from here down into Dorsetshire."

"I have not thought anything about it yet, Ralph; but probably Mr. Penfold will give some instructions as to your journey when he hears from me that you are coming."

CHAPTER II.
A COUNTRY VISIT

When Ralph had gone off to school again Mrs. Conway sat down to answer the letter—by no means an easy task—and she sat with the paper before her for a long time before she began. At last, with an air of desperation, she dipped her pen into the ink and began:

> "MY DEAR HERBERT PENFOLD: It is difficult to answer such a letter as yours—to say all one feels without saying too much; to express the gratitude with which one is full, but of which one feels that you do not desire the expression. First, a word as to the past. Now that it is irreparable, why should I not speak freely? We were the victims of a mistake! You were misled respecting me. I foolishly resented the line you took, failed to make sufficient allowances for your surroundings, and even doubted a love that seemed to me to be so easily shaken. Thus my pride was, perhaps, as much responsible for what happened as your too easy credence of tales to my disadvantage. At any rate, believe me that I have cherished no such feelings as those with which you credit me toward you. Now that I know the truth, I can only regret that your life has been, as you say, spoiled, by what can but be called a fatal misunderstanding.
>
> "Next, I must thank you, although you make no allusion

to it in your letter, for your kindness during past years. Of these, believe me, I never suspected that you were the author; and I need hardly say how deeply I have been touched at finding that the hand to which I and my boy owe so much is that of Herbert Penfold. Of this I will say no more. I leave you to picture my feelings and my gratitude. Also, most warmly I thank you for your intentions regarding my boy. He will be ready to come to you on Friday week. I suppose his best way will be to go by coach to London and then down to you, or he could take passage perhaps in a coaster. He is very fond of the sea.

"We had settled that he should enter the army; but of course I consider that nothing will be decided on this or any other point as to his future until I know your wishes on the matter. Lastly, dear Herbert, believe me that the news that you have given me concerning your state of health has caused me deep sorrow, and I earnestly hope and trust that the doctors may be mistaken in your case, that you may have a long life before you, and that life may be happier in the future than it has been in the past.

"I remain,

"Your grateful and affectionate

"MARY CONWAY."

A fortnight later Ralph Conway took his place on the outside of the coach for London. As to the visit to this unknown friend of his mother, he anticipated no pleasure from it whatever; but at the same time the journey itself was delightful to him. He had never during his remembrance been further away from Dover

than Canterbury; and the trip before him was in those days a more important one than a journey half over Europe would be at the present time. In his pocket he carried a piece of paper, on which his mother had carefully written down the instructions contained in the letter she had received in answer to her own from Herbert Penfold. Sewn up in the lining of his waistcoat were five guineas, so that in case the coach was stopped by highwaymen, or any other misfortune happened, he would still be provided with funds for continuing his journey.

Under the seat was a small basket filled with sandwiches, and his head ought to have been equally well filled with the advice his mother had given him as to his behavior at Penfold Hall. As his place had been booked some days before, he had the advantage of an outside seat. Next to him was a fat woman, who was going up to town, as she speedily informed her fellow-passengers, to meet her husband, who was captain of a whaler.

"I see in the *Gazette* of to-day," she said, "as his ship was signaled off Deal yesterday, and with this ere wind he will be up at the docks to-morrow; so off I goes. He's been away nigh eighteen months; and I know what men is. Why, bless you, if I wasn't there to meet him when he steps ashore, as likely as not he would meet with friends and go on the spree, and I shouldn't hear of him for a week; and a nice hole that would make in his earnings. Young man, you are scrouging me dreadful! Can't you get a little further along."

"It seems to me, ma'am, that it is you who are scrouging me,"

Ralph replied. "This rail is almost cutting into my side now."

"Well, we must live and let live!" the woman said philosophically. "You may thank your stars nature hasn't made you as big as I am. Little people have their advantages. But we can't have everything our own way. That's what I tells my Jim; he is always a-wanting to have his own way. That comes from being a captain; but, as I tells him, it's only reasonable as he is captain on board his ship I should be captain in my house. I suppose you are going to school?"

"No, I am not. My school is just over."

"Going all the way up to London?"

"Yes."

"That's a mercy," the woman said. "I was afraid you might be only going as far as Canterbury, and then I might have got some big chap up here who would squeeze me as flat as a pancake. Men is so unthoughtful, and seems to think as women can stow themselves away anywheres. I wish you would feel and get your hand in my pocket, young man. I can't do it nohow, and I ain't sure that I have got my keys with me; and that girl Eliza will be getting at the bottles and a-having men in, and then there will be a nice to-do with the lodgers. Can't you find it? It is in the folds somewhere."

With much difficulty Ralph found the pocket-hole, and thrusting his hand in was able to reassure his neighbor by feeling among a mass of odds and ends a bunch of keys.

"That's a comfort," the woman said. "If one's mind isn't at

ease one can't enjoy traveling."

"I wish my body was at ease," Ralph said. "Don't you think you could squeeze them a little on the other side and give me an inch or two more room?"

"I will try," the woman said; "as you seem a civil sort of boy."

Whereupon she gave two or three heaves, which relieved Ralph greatly, but involved her in an altercation with her neighbor on the other side, which lasted till the towers of Canterbury came in sight. Here they changed horses at the Fountain Inn.

"Look here, my boy," the woman said to Ralph. "If you feel underneath my feet you will find a basket, and at the top there is an empty bottle. There will be just time for you to jump down and get it filled for me. A shilling's worth of brandy, and filled up with water. That girl Eliza flustered me so much with her worritting and questions before I started that I had not time to fill it."

Ralph jumped down and procured the desired refreshment, and was just in time to clamber up to his seat again when the coach started. He enjoyed the rapid motion and changing scene much, but he was not sorry when—as evening was coming on—he saw ahead of him a dull mist, which his fellow-passenger told him was the smoke of London.

It was nine in the evening when the coach drove into the courtyard of the Bull Inn. The guard, who had received instructions from Mrs. Conway, at once gave Ralph and his box into the charge of one of the porters awaiting the arrival of

the coach, and told him to take the box to the inn from which the coach for Weymouth started in the morning. Cramped by his fourteen hours' journey Ralph had at first some difficulty in following his conductor through the crowded street, but the stiffness soon wore off, and after ten minutes walking he arrived at the inn.

The guard had already paid the porter, having received the money for that purpose from Mrs. Conway; and the latter setting down the box in the passage at once went off. Ralph felt a little forlorn, and wondered what he was to do next. But a minute later the landlady came out from the bar.

"Do you want a bed?" she asked. "The porter should have rung the bell. I am afraid we are full, unless it has been taken beforehand. However, I will see if I can make shift somehow."

"I should be very much obliged if you can," Ralph said; "for I don't know anything about London, and am going on by the Weymouth coach in the morning."

"Oh, might your name be Conway?"

"Yes, that is my name," Ralph said, surprised.

"Ah, then there is a bedroom taken for you. A gentleman came three days ago and took it, saying it was for a young gent who is going through to Weymouth. Tom," she called, "take this box up to number 12. Supper is ready for you, sir. I dare say you would like a wash first?"

"That I should," Ralph replied, following the boots upstairs.

In a few minutes he returned, and a waiter directed him to

the coffee-room. In a short time a supper consisting of fish, a steak, and tea was placed before him. Ralph fell to vigorously, and the care that had been bestowed by Mr. Penfold in securing a bedroom and ordering supper for him greatly raised him in the boy's estimation; and he looked forward with warmer anticipations than he had hitherto done to his visit to him. As goon as he had finished he went off to bed, and in a few minutes was sound asleep. At half-past six he was called, and after a hearty breakfast took his seat on the outside of the Weymouth coach.

Sitting beside him were four sailors, belonging, as he soon learned, to a privateer lying at Weymouth. They had had a long trip, and had been some months at sea; and as their ship was to lie for a fortnight at Weymouth while some repairs were being done to her, they had obtained a week's leave and had ran up to London for a spree. Weymouth during the war did a brisk trade, and was a favorite rendezvous of privateers, who preferred it greatly to Portsmouth or Plymouth, where the risk of their men being pressed to make up the quota of some man-of-war just fitted out was very great.

The sailors were rather silent and sulky, at first at the cruise on land being nearly over, but after getting off the coach where it changed horses they recovered their spirits, and amused Ralph greatly with their talk about the various prizes they had taken, and one or two sharp brashes with French privateers. Toward evening they became rather hilarious, but for the last two hours

dozed quietly; the man sitting next to Ralph lurching against him heavily in his sleep, and swearing loudly when the boy stuck his elbow into his ribs to relieve himself of the weight. Ralph was not sorry, therefore, when at ten o'clock at night the coach arrived at Weymouth. The landlord and servants came out with lanterns to help the passengers to alight, and the former, as Ralph climbed down the side into the circle of light, asked:

"Are you Master Conway?"

"That's my name," Ralph replied.

"A bed has been taken for you, sir, and a trap will be over here at nine o'clock in the morning to take you to Penfold Hall."

Supper was already prepared for such passengers as were going to sleep in the hotel; but Ralph was too sleepy to want to eat, and had made a good meal when the coach stopped at six o'clock for twenty minutes to allow the passengers time for refreshments. At eight o'clock next morning he breakfasted. When he had finished the waiter told him that the trap had arrived a few minutes before, and that the horse had been taken out to have a feed, but would be ready to start by nine. Ralph took a stroll for half an hour by the sea and then returned. The trap was at the door, and his trunk had already been placed in it. The driver, a man of twenty-three or twenty-four, was, as he presently told Ralph, stable-helper at Penfold Hall.

"I generally drive this trap when it is wanted," he said. "The coachman is pretty old now. He has been in the family well-nigh fifty years. He is all right behind the carriage-horses, he says, but

he does not like trusting himself in a pair-wheel trap."

"How far is it?"

"A matter of fifteen miles. It would be a lot shorter if you had got off last night at the nearest point the coach goes to; but the master told the coachman that he thought it would be pleasanter for you to come on here than to arrive there tired and sleepy after dark."

"Yes, it will much more pleasant," Ralph said. "The road was very dirty, and I should not like to arrive at a strange house with my clothes all covered with dust, and so sleepy that I could hardly keep my eyes open, especially as I hear that Mr. Penfold's sisters are rather particular."

"Rather isn't the word," the driver said; "they are particular, and no mistake. I don't believe as the master would notice whether the carriage was dirty or clean; but if there is a speck of dirt about they are sure to spot it. Not that they are bad mistresses; but they look about all right, I can tell you, pretty sharp. I don't say that it ain't as well as they do, for the master never seems to care one way or the other, and lets things go anyhow. A nice gentleman he is, but I don't see much of him; and he don't drive in the carriage not once a month, and only then when he is going to the board of magistrates. He just walks about the garden morning and evening, and all the rest of the time he is shut up in the library with his books. It's a pity he don't go out more."

"Are there any families about with boys?" Ralph asked.

"Not as I knows of. None of then that ever comes to the Hall, anyhow. It's a pity there ain't some young ones there; it would wake the place up and make it lively. It would give us a lot more work to do, I don't doubt; but we shouldn't mind that. I have heard it used to be different in the old squire's time, but it has always been so as long as I can remember. I don't live at the house, but down at the village. Jones he lives over the stables; and there ain't no occasion to have more than one there, for there's only the two carriage-horses and this."

"How far is the sea from the house?"

"It's about half a mile to the top of the cliff, and a precious long climb down to the water; but going round by Swanage—which is about three miles—you can drive down close to the sea, for there are no cliffs there."

There was little more said during the drive. From time to time the man pointed out the various villages and country seats, and Ralph wondered to himself how he should manage to pass the next three weeks. It seemed that there would be nothing to do and no one to talk to. He had always been accustomed to the companionship of lots of boys of his own age, and during the holidays there was plenty of sailing and fishing, so that time had never hung on his hands; the present prospect therefore almost appalled him. However, he had promised his mother that he would try to make the best of things; and he tried to assure himself that after all three weeks or a month would be over at last. After an hour and a half's drive they passed through a lodge

gate into a park, and in a few minutes drew up at the entrance to Penfold Hall. An old servant came out.

"Will you come with me into the library, sir? Mr. Penfold is expecting you. Your box will be taken up into your room."

Ralph felt extremely uncomfortable as he followed his conductor across a noble hall, floored with dark polished oak, and paneled with the same material. A door opened, and a servant announced "Master Conway." A gentleman rose from his chair and held out his hand.

"I am glad to see you, Ralph Conway; and I hope your journey has been a pretty comfortable one. It is very good of you to come such a long distance to pay me a visit."

"Mother wanted me to, sir," Ralph said honestly. "I don't think —" and he stopped.

"You don't think you would have come of your own accord, Ralph? No, that is natural enough, my boy. At your age I am sure I should not have cared to give up my holidays and spend them in a quiet house among strangers. However, I wanted to see you, and I am very glad you have come. I am an old friend of your mother's, you know, and so desired to make the acquaintance of her son. I think you are like her," he said, putting his hand on Ralph's shoulder and taking him to the window and looking steadily at him.

"Other people have said so, sir; but I am sure I can't see how I can be like her a bit. Mother is so pretty, and I am sure I am not the least bit in the world; and I don't think it's nice for a boy

to be like a woman."

This was rather a sore point with Ralph, who had a smooth soft face with large eyes and long eyelashes, and who had, in consequence, been nicknamed "Sally" by his schoolfellows. The name had stuck to him in spite of several desperate fights, and the fact that in point of strength and activity he was fully a match for any boy of his own age; but as there was nothing like derision conveyed by it, and it was indeed a term of affection rather, than of contempt, Ralph had at last ceased to struggle against it. But he longed for the time when the sprouting of whiskers would obliterate the obnoxious smoothness of his face. Mr. Penfold had smiled at his remark.

"I do not like girlish boys, Ralph; but a boy can have a girlish face and yet be a true boy all over. I fancy that's your case.

"I hope so, sir. I think I can swim or run or fight any of the chaps of my own age in the school; but I know I do look girlish about the face. I have done everything I could to make my face rough. I have sat in the sun, and wetted it with sea-water every five minutes, but it's no use."

"I should not trouble about it. Your face will get manly enough in time, you may be sure; and I like you all the better for it, my boy, because you are certainly very like your mother. And now, Ralph, I want you to enjoy yourself as much as you can while you are here. The house itself is dull, but I suppose you will be a good deal out of doors. I have hired a pony, which will be here to-day from Poole, and I have arranged with Watson, a fisherman

at Swanage, that you can go out with him in his fishing-boat whenever you are disposed. It is three miles from here, but you can ride over on your pony and leave it at the little inn there till you come back. I am sorry to say I do not know any boys about here; but Mabel Withers, the daughter of my neighbor and friend the clergyman of Bilston, the village just outside the lodge, has a pony, and is a capital rider, and I am sure she will show you over the country. I suppose you have not had much to do with girls?" he added with a smile at seeing a slight expression of dismay on Ralph's face, which had expressed unmixed satisfaction at the first items of the programme.

"No, sir; not much," Ralph said. "Of course some of my schoolfellows have sisters, but one does not see much of them."

"I think you will get on very well together. She is a year or two younger than you are, and I am afraid she is considered rather a tomboy. She has been caught at the top of a tall tree examining the eggs in a nest, and in many similar ungirl-like positions; so you won't find her a dull companion. She is a great pet of mine, and though she may not be as good a companion as a boy would be for you, I am sure when you once get to know her you will find her a very good substitute. You see, not having had much to do with boys, I am not very good at devising amusement for you. I can only say that if there is anything you would like to do while you are here you have only to tell me, and if it be possible I will put you in the way of it."

"Thank you very much, sir. You are extremely kind," Ralph

said heartily; for with a pony and a boat it did seem that his visit would not be nearly so dull as he had anticipated. "I am sure I shall get on capitally."

Just at his moment there was a knock at the door. It opened, and a girl entered.

"You have just come at the right moment, Mabel," Mr. Penfold said as she came in. "This is Ralph Conway, of whom I was speaking to you. Ralph, this is Mabel Withers. I asked her to come in early this morning so as to act as your guide round the place."

The boy and girl shook hands with each other. She was the first to speak.

"So you are Ralph. I have been wondering what you would be like. Uncle has been telling me you were coming. I like your looks, and I think you are nice."

Ralph was taken rather aback. This was not the way in which his schoolfellows' sisters had generally addressed him.

"I think you look jolly," he said; "and that's better than looking nice."

"I think they mean the same thing," she replied; "except that a girl says 'nice' and a boy says 'jolly.' I like the word 'jolly' best, only I get scolded when I use it. Shall we go into the garden?"

Altogether Ralph Conway had a very much pleasanter time than he had anticipated. Except at meals he saw little of the Miss Penfolds. His opinion as to these ladies, expressed confidentially to Mabel Withers, was the reverse of flattering.

"I think," he said, "that they are the two most disagreeable old cats I have ever met. They hardly ever open their lips, and when they do it is only to answer some question of their brother. I remember in a fairy story there was a girl who whenever she spoke let fall pearls and diamonds from her lips; whenever those women open their mouths I expect icicles and daggers to drop out."

"They are not so bad as that," Mabel laughed. "I generally get on with them very well, and they are very kind in the parish; and altogether they are really not bad."

"Then their looks belie them horribly," Ralph said. "I suppose they don't like me; and that would be all well enough if I had done anything to offend them, but it was just as bad the first day I came. I am sure Mr. Penfold does not like it. I can see him fidget on his chair; and he talks away with me pretty well all the time we are at table, so as to make it less awkward, I suppose. Well, I am stopping with him, and not with them, that's one thing; and it doesn't make much difference to me if they do choose to be disagreeable. I like him immensely. He is wonderfully kind; but it would be awfully stupid work if it weren't for you, Mabel. I don't think I could stand it if it were not for our rides together."

The young people had indeed got on capitally from the first. Every day they took long rides together, generally alone, although sometimes Mr. Penfold rode with them. Ralph had already confided to the latter, upon his asking him how he liked Mabel, that she was the jolliest girl that he had ever met.

"She has no nonsensical girl's ways about her, Mr. Penfold; but is almost as good as a boy to be with. The girls I have seen before have been quite different from that. Some of them always giggle when you speak to them, others have not got a word to say for themselves; and it is awfully hard work talking to them even for a single dance. Still, I like them better than the giggling ones."

"You see, Ralph, girls brought up in a town are naturally different to one like Mabel. They go to school, and are taught to sit upright and to behave discreetly, and to be general unnatural. Mabel has been brought up at home and allowed to do as she liked, and she has consequently grown up what nature intended her to be. Perhaps some day all girls will be allowed the same chance of being natural that boys have, and backboards and other contrivances for stiffening them and turning them into little wooden figures will be unknown. It will be a good thing, in my opinion, when that time arrives."

Ralph was often down at the Rectory, where he was always made welcome, Mr. Withers and his wife being anxious to learn as much of his disposition as they could. They were well satisfied with the result.

"I fancy I know what is in Penfold's mind," the rector had said to his wife a few days after Ralph came down. "I believe he has already quite settled it in his mind that some day Mabel and this lad shall make a match of it."

"How absurd, John. Why, Mabel is only a child."

"Quite so, my dear; but in another three or four years she will

be a young woman. I don't mean that Penfold has any idea that they are going to take a fancy to each other at present—only that they will do so in the future. You know he has said that he intends to leave a slice of his fortune to her, and I have no doubt that this lad will get the main bulk of his property. I have often told you about his engagement to the lad's mother, and how the breaking it off has affected his whole life. It is natural that a lonely man as *he* is should plan for others. He has no future of his own to look forward to, so he looks forward to some one else's. He has had no interest in life for a great many years, and I think he is making a new one for himself in the future of our girl and this lad.

"As far as I have seen of the boy I like him. He is evidently a straightforward, manly lad. I don't mean to say that he has any exceptional amount of brains, or is likely to set the Thames on fire; but if he comes into the Penfold property that will not be of much importance. He seems bright, good-tempered, and a gentleman. That is quite good enough to begin with. At any rate, there is nothing for us to trouble about. If some day the young people get to like each other the prospect is a good one for the child; if not, there's no harm done. At present there can be no objection to our yielding to Penfold's request and letting them ride about the country together. Mabel is, as you say, little more than a child, and it is evident that the lad regards her rather in the light of a boy companion than as a girl.

"She is a bit of a tomboy, you know, Mary, and has very few girlish notions or ideas. They evidently get on capitally together,

and we need not trouble our heads about them but let things go their own way with a clear conscience."

At the end of the time agreed upon Ralph returned home.

"And so, Ralph, you have found it better than you expected?" his mother said to him at the conclusion of his first meal at home.

"Much better, mother. Mr. Penfold is awfully kind, and lets one do just what one likes. His sisters are hateful women, and if I had not been staying in the house I should certainly have played them some trick or other just to pay them out. I wonder why they disliked me so much. I could see it directly I arrived; but, after all, it didn't matter much, except just at meals and in the evening. But though Mr. Penfold was so kind, it would have been very stupid if it had not been for Mabel Withers. We used to ride out or go for walks together every day. She was a capital walker, and very jolly—almost as good as a boy. She said several times that she wished she had been a boy, and I wished so too. Still, of course, mother, I am very glad I am back. There is no place like home, you know; and then there are the fellows at school, and the games, and the sea, and all sorts of things; and it's a horrid nuisance to think that I have got to go down there regularly for my holidays. Still, of course, as you wish it, I will do so; and now that I know what it is like it won't be so bad another time. Anyhow, I am glad I have got another ten days before school begins."

The following morning Ralph went down to the beach. "Why, Master Conway," an old fisherman said, "you are a downright stranger. I have missed you rarely."

"I told you I was going away, Joe, and that I shouldn't get back until the holidays were nearly over."

"I know you did," the fisherman replied. "Still it does seem strange without you. Every time as I goes out I says to Bill, 'If Master Conway was at home he would be with us to-day, Bill. It don't seem no ways natural without him.' And there's been good fishing, too, this season, first rate; and the weather has been just what it should be."

"Well, I am back now, Joe, anyhow; and I have got ten days before school begins again, and I mean to make the most of it. Are you going out to-day?"

"At four o'clock," the fisherman said. "Daylight fishing ain't much good just now; we take twice as many at night."

"No trouble with the Frenchies?"

"Lord bless you I ain't seen a French sail for months. Our cruisers are too sharp for them; though they say a good many privateers run in and out of their ports in spite of all we can do, and a lot of our ships get snapped up. But we don't trouble about them. Why, bless your heart, if one of them was to run across us they would only just take our fish, and as likely as not pay us for them with a cask or two of spirits. Fish is a treat to them Frenchies; for their fishing boats have to keep so close over to their own shores that they can't take much. Besides, all their best fishermen are away in the privateers, and the lads have to go to fight Boney's battles with the Austrians or Russians, or Spanish or our chaps, or else to go on board their ships of war and spend

all their time cooped up in harbor, for they scarce show now beyond the range of the guns in their forts. Well, will you come this evening?"

"Yes, I think so, Joe. My mother doesn't much care about my being out at night, you know; but as I have been away all this time to please her, I expect she will let me do what I like for the rest of the holidays."

"Don't you come if your mother don't like it, Master Conway; there is never no good comes of boys vexing their mothers. I have known misfortune to follow it over and over again. Boys think as they know best what's good for them; but they don't, and sooner or later they are sure to own it to themselves."

"I shouldn't do it if I knew she really didn't like it, Joe; but I don't think she does mind my going out with you at any time. She knows she can trust you. Beside, what harm could come of it? You never go out in very rough weather."

"Pretty roughish sometimes, Master Conway."

"Oh, yes, pretty rough; but not in a gale, you know. Beside, the Heartsease could stand a goodish gale. She is not very fast, you know, but she is as safe as a house."

"She is fast enough," the old fisherman said in an injured tone. "But you young gentlemen is never content unless a boat is heeling over, gunnel under, and passing everything she comes across. What's the good of that ere to a fisherman? He goes out to catch fish, not to strain his craft all over by running races against another. Now an hour faster or slower makes no difference, and

the Heartsease is fast enough for me, anyhow."

"No, she isn't, Joe. I have heard you use bad language enough when anything overhauls and passes her on the way back to port."

"Ay, that may be," the fisherman admitted; "and on the way home I grant you that a little more speed might be an advantage, for the first comer is sure to get the best market. No, the Heartsease ain't very fast, I own up to that; but she is safe and steady, and she has plenty of storage room and a good roomy cabin as you can stand upright in, and needn't break your back by stooping as you have to do on board some craft I could name."

"That's true enough, Joe," the boy said.

"But what's more, she's a lucky boat; for it's seldom that she goes out without getting a good catch."

"I think that's more judgment than luck, Joe; though there may be some luck in it too."

"I don't know about that, Master Conway. Of course one wants a sharp eye to see where the shoals are moving; but I believes in luck. Well, sir, shall I see you again before the afternoon?"

"I don't much expect so, Joe. I have got to call at some other places, and I don't suppose I shall have time to get down before. If I am coming I shall be sure to be punctual; so if I am not here by four, go off without me."

Mrs. Conway made no objection when Ralph proffered his request. He had sacrificed the greater part of his holidays to carrying out her wishes, and paying a visit to Mr. Penfold; and although she did not like his being out all night fishing, she could

not refuse his request; and, indeed, as she knew that Joe Knight was a steady man and not fond of the bottle, there was no good reason why she should object. She, therefore, cheerfully assented, saying at the same time, "I will pack a basket for you before you start, Ralph. There is a nice piece of cold meat in the house, and I will have that and a loaf of bread and some cheese put up for you. I know what these fishing excursions are; you intend to be back at a certain time, and then the wind falls, or the tide turns, or something of that sort, and you can't make the harbor. You know what a fright you gave me the very first time you went out fishing with Joe Knight. You were to have been back at five o'clock in the afternoon, and you did not get in until three o'clock the next morning."

"I remember, mother; and there you were on the quay when we came in. I was awfully sorry about it."

"Well, I have learned better since, Ralph; and I know now that there is not necessarily any danger, even if you don't come back by the time I expect you. And of course each time I have fidgeted and you have come back safe, I have learned a certain amount of sea-knowledge, and have come to know that sailors and fishermen are not accountable for time; and that if the wind drops or tide turns they are helpless in the matter, and have only to wait till a breeze comes up again."

"I think, mother, you ought to like my going out at night better than in the daytime."

"Why, Ralph?"

"Because, mother, if I go out in the daytime and don't get back until after dark, you worry yourself, and having no one to talk to, sit here wondering and wondering until you fancy all sorts of things. Now, if I go out in the evening, and I don't come back in the morning at the hour you expect, you see that it is fine and bright, and that there is nothing to make you uneasy; or if you do feel fidgety, you can walk down to the beach and talk to the boatmen and fishermen, and of course they can tell you at once that there's nothing to worry about, and very likely point the boat out to you in the distance."

"Well, Ralph, perhaps that is so, although I own I never looked at it in that light before."

CHAPTER III.
RUN DOWN

"There's a nice breeze," Ralph said as he joined the fisherman at the appointed hour.

"Yes, it's just right; neither too light nor too heavy. It's rather thick, and I shouldn't be surprised if we get it thicker; but that again don't matter." For in those days not one ship plowed the waters of our coast for every fifty that now make their way along it. There were no steamers, and the fear of collision was not ever in the minds of those at sea.

"Where's Bill, Joe?"

"The young scamp!" the fisherman said angrily. "Nothing will do for him but to go a-climbing up the cliffs this morning; and just after you left us, news comes that the young varmint had fallen down and twisted his foot, and doctor says it will be a fortnight afore he can put a boot on. Then the old woman began a-crying over him; while, as I told her, if any one ought to cry it would be me, who's got to hire another boy in his place to do his work. A touch of the strap would be the best thing for him, the young rascal!"

"You are not going to take another boy out to-night are you, Joe?"

"No, Master Conway, I knows you like a-doing things. You have been out enough with me to know as much about it as Bill,

and after all there ain't a very great deal to do. The trawl ain't a heavy one, and as I am accustomed to work it with Bill I can do it with you."

The Heartsease was a good-sized half-decked boat of some twenty-six feet long and eight feet beam. She was very deep, and carried three tons of stone ballast in her bottom. She drew about six feet of water. She had a lot of freeboard, and carried two lug-sails and a small mizzen.

They got in the small boat and rowed off to her.

"There was no call for you to bring that basket, Master Conway. I know you are fond of a fish fried just when it is taken out of the water; and I have got bread and a keg of beer, to say nothing of a mouthful of spirits in case we get wet. Not that it looks likely we shall, for I doubts if there will be any rain to-night I think there will be more wind perhaps, and that it will get thicker; that's my view of the weather."

They sailed straight out to sea. Joe had fitted his boat to be worked with the aid of a boy only. He had a handy winch, by which he hoisted his heavy lug-sails, and when the weather was rough hauled up his trawls. Of these he carried two, each fourteen feet long, and fished with them one out on each quarter. When he reached the fishing ground six miles out, Joe lowered the mizzen lug and reefed the main, for there was plenty of wind to keep the boat going at the pace required for trawling under the reduced sail. Then the trawls were got overboard, each being fastened to the end of a stout spar lashed across the deck, and projecting

some eight feet on either side, by which arrangement the trawls were kept well apart. They were hauled alternately once an hour, two hours being allowed after they were put down before the first was examined.

By the time the first net came up the sun had set. The wind had freshened a bit since they had started, but there was no sea to speak of. The night had set in thick, and the stars could only occasionally be seen. Joe had picked out two or three fine fish from the first haul, and these he took down and soon had frizzling in a frying-pan over the fire, which he had lighted as soon as the boat was under sail.

"These are for you, Master Conway," he said. "With your permission I shall stick to that ere piece of beef your mother was good enough to send. Fish ain't no treat to me, and I don't often get meat. Keep your eye lifting while I am down below. There ain't many craft about in these days, still we might tumble against one."

"I should not see a light far in this mist, Joe."

"No, you couldn't; and what's worse, many of them don't carry no lights at all."

"It would be a good thing, Joe, if there was a law to make all vessels carry lights."

"Ay, ay, lad; but you see in war times it ain't always convenient. A peaceful merchantman don't want to show her lights to any privateers that may happen to be cruising about, and you may be sure that the privateer don't want to attract the

attention of peaceful traders until she is close upon them, or to come under the eye of any of our cruisers. No, no; there ain't many lights shown now, not in these waters. Folks prefer to risk the chance of running into each other rather than that of being caught by a French privateer."

Now that the trawls were out there was no occasion for any one to attend to the helm, consequently when Joe announced that the fish were ready Ralph went down and joined him in the cabin. The first hours of the night passed quietly. Once an hour a trawl was hauled in and got on board, and as the catches were satisfactory Joe was in capital spirit.

"You have brought good luck, Master Conway; and I notices I generally do well when you are out with me. I am getting more fish to-night than I have any night for weeks, and if it goes on like this till morning I shall make a good thing of it. I wants it bad enough, for I am in arrears a bit with my rent. The war has made everything so terrible dear that it is as much as a poor man can do to keep his head above water.

"What time is it now, Joe, do you think?"

"About two o'clock, I reckon. It will begin to get light in a couple of hours, and at five we will up nets and make our way back."

He had scarcely spoken when he shouted "Ship ahoy! Look out for yourself, lad!" Startled by the suddenness of the cry Ralph looked round. He saw a crest of white foam a few yards away in the darkness. A moment later something dark passed over his

head and a rope brushed his cheek, and as it did so a black mass struck the boat. There was a crash, a shock, and the Heartsease, after first heeling deeply over under the pressure, suddenly sank down like a stone. Ralph had staggered under the force of the collision, and would have fallen back as the boat heeled over, but instinctively he threw up his arms and his hand came in contact with the rope that had an instant before touched his cheek. He seized it with both hands, and threw his legs round it as the boat went down from under his feet, the whole thing being so sudden that it was nearly a minute before he could realize what had happened. Then he heard voices talking close by and, as it seemed, above him.

"Hullo!" he shouted. "Help!" A few seconds later the light of a lantern was flashed down upon him. Then a figure crawled out on the spar projecting above his head, seized him by the collar, and lifted him from the bobstay to which he was clinging on to the bowsprit. A minute later he was standing on the deck.

"Thank you!" he exclaimed. "Have you seen anything of the man who was with me? There were two of us on board. If not, please look for him at once."

"I am afraid it's no use," one of the men said, with a strong foreign accent; "he has gone down and will never come up again. You come along with me to the captain."

An uneasy feeling seized Ralph as he listened. He could see nothing, for the lantern had been placed in a bucket the moment that he touched the deck. At this moment a hail came from the

stern of the vessel, and Ralph's fears were at once realized, for it was in French. The reply was in the same tongue, and he was led aft. "Take him down below, Jacques, and let's see what he is like. We have suffered no damage, I hope?"

"Not as far as I could see by the light of the lantern, but the carpenter has gone below to see if she is making water."

The captain led the way down into the cabin. This was comfortably furnished and lighted by a swinging lamp. "Do you come, down Jacques, I shall want you to interpret."

The captain was surprised when he saw by the light of the lamp that the person they had rescued was a lad, well dressed, and evidently above the condition of fishermen.

"Now, young sir, who are you," he asked, "and what have you to say for yourself?" The question was translated by Jacques.

"I like that," the lad said indignantly. "What have I to say for myself! I think it's what have you to say for yourselves? We were quietly fishing when you ran over us and sank the boat and drowned my friend Joe, and haven't even stopped for a moment to see if you could pick him up. I call it shameful and inhuman!"

The French captain laughed as Jacques translated the speech, the purport of which he had, indeed, made out for himself, for although he did not speak English he understood it to some extent.

"Tell him it was his fault as much as ours. We did not see him till we struck him. And as for his companion, what chance was there of finding him on such a dark night as this? Why, by the

time we had hove round and got back again we might not have hit it within a quarter of a mile. Besides, if he had been alive he would have shouted."

Ralph saw, when he understood what the captain said, that there was truth in his words, and that the chances of discovering Joe would indeed have been slight even had the vessel headed round.

"May I ask," he said, "what ship this is, and what you are going to do with me?"

"The ship is La Belle Marie of Dunkirk; as to what we are going to do with you it is not so easy to say. Of course you can jump overboard again if you like, but if not you can stay on board until we have an opportunity of putting you ashore somewhere. How did you come to be on board a fishing smack? For I suppose it was a smack that we run down."

"I live at Dover," Ralph replied, "and had only come out for a night's fishing."

"Well, you are out of luck," the captain said. "That will do, Jacques. Take him forward and sling a hammock for him. Hang up his clothes in the cook's galley, they will be dry by the time he wakes."

Ralph asked no questions, as he was taken forward, as to the character of La Belle Marie. Six guns were ranged along on each side of her decks, and this, and the appearance of the captain's cabin, was sufficient to inform him that he had fallen into the hands of a French privateer. The craft had, indeed, left Dunkirk

soon after nightfall, and was making her way down channel with every sail set when she had run down the unfortunate fishing boat.

Jacques, as he hung up the hammock, explained to the sailors who crowded round the character of the passenger who had so unexpectedly come on board.

"Poor lad," one of the sailors said good-naturedly, "he will be some time before he sees his mother again. He hasn't got a very bright lookout before him—a long voyage, and then a prison. I will go and see if the cook has got some water hot. A glass of spirits will do him good."

A few minutes later Ralph was wrapped up in a blanket and the warm glow produced by that and the glass of strong grog soon sufficed to send him soundly to sleep, in spite of the painful uncertainty of his position and of his sorrowful thought of his mother, who would in the morning be inquiring for him in vain. It was nearly midday before he woke. Looking round he saw that he had the forecastle to himself. His clothes were lying on a chest close by, and in a few minutes he was on deck. A sense of disappointment stole over him. He had, while he was dressing, entertained the hope that on going on deck he should see an English cruiser in pursuit; but the wind had dropped and it was still thick, and his vision was confined to a circle a quarter of a mile in diameter. Jacques nodded to him good-temperedly, for all on board the privateer were in high spirits. Their voyage had begun propitiously; the darkness of the preceding night had

enabled them to run the gantlet of the British cruisers in the narrow part of the channel, they were now well down the coast of France, and the fog reduced their chances of being seen by an enemy to a minimum.

"Where about are we?" Ralph asked.

"We are somewhere off the mouth of the Seine, and I guess some fifteen miles from land."

"Oh, we are working down the channel then," Ralph said. "And where are we going to?"

"Ah! that question is for the captain to answer if he chooses," Jacques said.

"Are we going to touch at the next French port?" Ralph asked anxiously.

"Not that I know of, unless we have the luck to pick up one of your merchantmen, and we might then escort her into port. But unless we do that we do not touch anywhere, luckily for you; because, after all, it is a good deal pleasanter cruising in the Belle Marie than kicking your heels inside a prison. I know pretty well, for I was for four years a prisoner in your English town of Dorchester. That is how I came to speak your language. It was a weary time of it; though we were not badly treated, not half so bad as I have heard that the men in some other prisons were. So I owe you English no ill-will on that account, and from what I have heard some of our prisons are worse than any of yours. I used to knit stockings and wraps for the neck. My old mother taught me when I was a boy. And as we were allowed to sell the

things we made I got on pretty comfortable. Beside, what's the use of making yourself unhappy? I had neither wife nor children to be fretting about me at home, so I kept up my spirits."

"How did you get back?" Ralph asked. "Were you exchanged?"

"No," Jacques answered. "I might have waited long enough before that. I can't make out myself why the two governments don't agree to exchange prisoners more quickly. I suppose they take about an equal number. Your men-of-war ships capture more prisoners than ours, but we make up for it by the numbers our privateers bring in. At any rate they might exchange as many as they can, say once in six months. One would have thought they would be glad to do so so as to save themselves the trouble and expense of looking after and feeding such a number of useless mouths. Governments always have curious ways."

"But how did you get away from prison?" Ralph asked.

"It was a woman," the man replied. "It is always women who help men out of scrapes. It was the wife of one of the jailers. She used to bring her husband's dinner sometimes when we were exercising in the yard. When I first went there she had a child in her arms—a little thing about a year old. I was always fond of children; for we had a lot at home, brothers and sisters, and I was the eldest. She saw me look at it one day, and I suppose she guessed it reminded me of home. So she stopped and let me pat its cheek and talk to it. Then I knitted it some socks and a little jacket and other things, and that made a sort of friendship

between us. You can always win a woman's heart by taking notice of her child. Then she got to letting me carry it about on my shoulder while she took her husband's dinner in to him, if he did not happen to be in the yard. And when the little thing was able to totter it would hold on to my finger, and was always content to stay with me while she was away. So it went on till the child was four years old.

"One day it was running across the court to its mother as she came out from the prison. Two of the men were what you call skylarking, and running one way while the child was running the other. One of them knocked it down heavily. It was an accident, and if he had picked it up and been sorry, there would have been an end of it; but instead of that the brute burst into a loud laugh. By this time I was as fond of the child as if it had been my own, and I rushed furiously at him and knocked him down. As he sprang to his feet he drew a knife he used in wood-carving and came at me. I caught the blow on my arm and closed with him, and we fell together. The guard in the yard rushed up and pulled us apart, and we both got a fortnight's close confinement for fighting.

"The first time I came into the yard again and met the woman with her child, the little one ran to me; but the woman, a little to my surprise, said nothing. As she passed I lifted the child up, and after giving me a hug and a kiss she said: 'Mammy gave me this to give to you;' and she put a little note into my hand. I took the first opportunity to read it in a quiet corner. It was as follows:

'Dear Jacques—I saw how nobly you stood up for my Carrie the other day, and how you got wounded in protecting her. You have always been good to her. I have often thought I might help you to escape, but was afraid to try. Now I will do so. It will not be easy, but I will manage it. Do not be impatient; the child will give you another note when I have quite arranged things. I shall not talk much to you in future, or else when you have got away I may be suspected; so do not be surprised at my seeming cold.'

"After that the woman only brought her child once a week or so to the prison, and only gave me a nod as she passed through the yard. Upon the third visit of the child it gave me a little packet containing two or three small steel saws and a little bottle of oil. On the paper which held them was written, 'For the bars. You shall have a rope next time.' Sure enough next time the child had hidden in its frock a hank of very thin cord, which I managed as I was playing with her to slip unobserved into my breast. 'Mammy says more next time.' And next time another hank came. There was a third, and a note, 'Twist the three ropes together and they will be strong enough to bear you. On the third night from this, saw through the bars and lower yourself into court. There will be no moon. Go to the right-hand corner of the court in the rear of the prison. Fasten a knife to one end of the cord and throw it over the wall. I shall be waiting there with a friend. Directly you feel the cord jerked climb up to the top of the wall. If you can find something to fasten your end of the rope to you can slide down it. If not, you must jump. There will be a boat ready to

take you away.'

"It all turned out well. It was a pitch dark night, raining and blowing, and the sentries kept inside their boxes. I got up to the top of the wall all right, and was able to fasten the rope on to the spikes and slide down on the other side. The woman was there with a man, whom she told me was her brother. They took me to a creek two miles away and there put me on board a boat, and I was rowed out to a smuggling craft which at once set sail, and two days later was landed at Cherbourg. So that's how I came to learn English."

"Did you ever hear whether the woman who helped you was suspected?"

"I saw her brother two months afterward on one of the trips that the craft he belonged to made. He said that of course there were a great many inquiries made, and his sister had been questioned closely. She swore that she had hardly spoken to me for the last two months and that she had given me nothing; which in a way was true enough, for she had not handed them to me herself. The prisoners bore her out about her not coming near me, for it had been noticed that she was not as friendly as she had been. Some had thought her ungrateful, while others had fancied that she was angry at my interfering and making a tumult about the child. Anyhow, whatever suspicions they might have had they could prove nothing. They forbade her entering the prison in future; but she didn't mind that so long as her husband, who had been employed a good many years there, did not lose

his situation. He had been kept by her in entire ignorance of the whole affair, and was very indignant at her having been suspected. I sent her a letter of thanks by her brother, and a little present for her and one for the child. The brother was to give them to her as if from himself, so that the husband should not smell a rat, but of course to make her understand who they came from."

"Well, I only hope, Jacques," Ralph said, "that when I get shut up in one of your prisons I shall find some French woman to aid me to escape, just as you found an English woman to help you; only I hope it won't be four years coming about."

"I think we look sharper after our prisoners than you do; still it may be. But it will be some time before you are in prison; and if you play your cards well and learn to speak our language, and make yourself useful, I do not think the captain is likely to hand you over to the authorities when we get back to a French port again."

"I am quite ready to do my best to learn the language and to make myself useful," Ralph said. "It is always a good thing to know French, especially as I am going into the army some day; that is if I get back again in time."

"Oh, I think you will do so," the man said. "You keep up your spirits well, and that is the great thing. There are many boys that would sit down and cry if they found themselves in such a scrape as you have got into."

"Cry!" Ralph repeated indignantly. "You don't suppose a boy

of my age is going to cry like a girl! An English boy would be ashamed to cry, especially when Frenchmen were looking on."

Jacques laughed good-temperedly. "There would be nothing to be ashamed of. We are not like you cold English! A Frenchman laughs and sings when he is pleased, and cries when he is sorry. Why shouldn't he?"

"Oh, I can't tell you why," Ralph replied, "only we don't do it. I don't say I shouldn't halloo out if I were hurt very much, though I should try my best not to; but I feel sure I shouldn't cry like a great baby. Why, what would be the good of it?"

Jacques shrugged his shoulders. "People are different," he said. "A man is not a coward because he cries. I have seen two boys fighting and pulling each other's hair and crying all the time, but they fought on. They did not cry because they were afraid."

"Pulling each other's hair!" Ralph repeated contemptuously. "They ought to have been ashamed of themselves, both of them. I don't call that fighting at all. I should call it disgusting. Why, in England even girls would hardly pull each other's hair. I have seen two or three fights between fishwomen in Dover, and even they did not go on like that. If that's the way French boys fight, no wonder our soldiers and sailors—" But here it struck Ralph that the remark he was about to make would be altogether out of place under present circumstances. He was therefore seized with an opportune fit of coughing, and then turned the conversation by asking Jacques at what rate he thought the vessel was slipping through the water.

A few minutes later the first mate came up and told Jacques to inform Ralph that the captain had ordered him to be supplied with clothes similar to those worn by the rest of the crew, and that he was to be told off to take his post regularly as a boy in the starboard watch. Ralph was well pleased at the news. He felt that his best chance was to make himself useful on board, and to become one of the crew as soon as possible, so that in case an English merchantman was met with and captured he should not be sent with her crew as a prisoner to a French port. As long as he was on board various opportunities of escape might present themselves. He might slip away in port, or the brig might be captured by an English cruiser or privateer; whereas, once lodged in a French prison, the chances of such good fortune as had befallen Jacques were slight indeed. He therefore at once turned to with alacrity.

That he would have a hard time of it for a bit he felt sure; for although in Jacques he had evidently found a friend, he saw by the scowling glances of several of the men as he passed near them that the national feeling told heavily against him. Nor was it surprising that it should be so. The animosity between the two nations had lasted so long that it had extended to individuals. Englishmen despised as well as disliked Frenchmen. They were ready to admit that they might be brave, but considered them as altogether wanting in personal strength. The popular belief was that they were half-starved, and existed chiefly upon frogs and hot water with a few bits of bread and scraps of vegetables in

it which they called soup, and that upon the sea especially they were almost contemptible. Certainly the long succession of naval victories that our fleets had won afforded some justification for our sailors' opinion of the enemy. But in fights between detached vessels the French showed many times that in point of courage they were in no way inferior to our own men; and indeed our victories were mainly due to two causes. In the first place, the superior physique and stamina of our men, the result partly of race and partly of feeding; they were consequently able to work their guns faster and longer than could their adversaries. In the second place the British sailor went into battle with an absolute conviction that he was going to be victorious; while the Frenchman, on the other hand, although determined to do his best to win, had from the first doubts whether the British would not be as usual victorious.

It is probable that the French sailors hated us far more than our men did them. We had lowered their national prestige, had defeated them whenever we met them, had blockaded their ports, ruined their trade, inflicted immense damage upon their fisheries, and subsidized other nations against them, and were the heart and center of the coalition against which France was struggling to maintain herself. It was not therefore surprising that among the hundred and ten men on board La Belle Marie there were many who viewed Ralph with hostile eyes and who only refrained from personal violence owing to the strict order the captain had given that he should be well treated.

Toward midday the fog lifted suddenly and the wind freshened, and lookouts were stationed in the tops. There was little hope indeed of any English merchantmen having come over so far toward the French coast, but British cruisers might be anywhere. A few distant sails could be seen far out on the horizon proceeding up or down channel; but the captain of La Belle Marie had no idea of commencing operations until very much further away from the shores of England. All day the vessel ran down the French coast; and although he was a captive, and every mile reeled off the log took him further from home, Ralph could not help admiring the speed at which the brig slipped through the water, cutting the waves with her sharp bow and leaving scarcely a ripple behind her, so fine and clean was her run. Very different was this smooth, gliding motion from the quick plunge and shock of the bluff-bowed fishing boat to which he was accustomed. The sails had been scrubbed until there was not a speck upon them. The masts were lofty and tapering, the rigging neat and trim, and every stay as taut as iron.

We could fight our ships better than the French, but as far as building and rigging went they were vastly our superiors; and La Belle Marie looked to Ralph almost like a gentleman's yacht in its cleanness and order, and in these respects vied with the men-of-war that he had so often watched from the heights of Dover. He had, however, but little time for admiration; for he was kept at work rubbing and polishing the guns and brass-work, and was not idle for a minute from the time he came on deck dressed as

a cabin-boy on the morning after he was picked up until sunset. There were two French boys about his own age forward, and as soon as his work was done and the evening watch set they began to torment him; for, acting as they did as servants to the officers, they did not take share in the watch.

Fortunately Jacques had gone below at the same time as Ralph; and when the boys, finding that their taunts had no effect whatever upon Ralph, began to get bolder, and one of them snatched off his cap, Jacques interfered at once. "Look here, youngsters," he said, "this young English boy is at present one of the crew of this brig, and he has just the same right to fair treatment as any one else, so I warn you if you interfere with him you will have to fight him fairly. I know enough of these English boys to know that with your hands you would not have the least chance with him. He could thrash you both at once; for even little English boys do not wrestle, tear, and kick, but hit straight out just as the men do.

"With swords it would be different, but in a row between you and him it would be just the naked hands. So I advise you to leave him alone, for if you make him fight I will see fair play. All the time I was a prisoner in England I was well treated by his people, and just as I was treated myself and saw other French prisoners treated so I will see him treated. Before this voyage is over it is not impossible the tables will be turned, and that you may find yourselves prisoners in the hands of the English; so I recommend you to behave to him in the same way you would like

to be treated yourselves if you were taken prisoners. I can see the lad is good-tempered and willing. He is a stranger here among us all, he can't speak a word of our language, and he has a right to fair treatment. When he gets to know our language he will be able to shift for himself; but until he does I mean to look after him, and any one who plays tricks on him has got to talk to me."

As Jacques Clery was one of the most powerful and active men on board the brig, this assertion was sufficient to put a stop to practical joking with Ralph, and the lad had a much easier time of it than he expected. The men, finding him willing to work and anxious to oblige in every way, soon took to him; and by paying attention to their talk, and asking the French name of every object on board the ship, it was not many days before Ralph found himself able so far to understand that he could obey orders, and pull and haul on any sheet that needed handling.

Upon the second day, the wind having dropped again, more sail was set, and when the word was given to go aloft he went up with the rest; and although he was of little practical use in loosing the gaskets, he soon shook off his first feelings of discomfort and nervousness on seeing how carelessly and unconcernedly the men on each side of him did their work, and before he had been many days at sea was as quick and active aloft as any of the hands on board the brig. After running down nearly as far as Bordeaux the vessel's head was pointed west, and by nightfall the French coast was out of sight. A vigilant lookout was now kept, one man being constantly stationed aloft, and by the increased animation of the

crew Ralph judged that they would soon arrive at a point where they should be on the course of homeward bound merchantmen. He had quite made up his mind that, although ready in all other matters to do his duty as one of the crew of La Belle Marie, nothing should induce him to take part in a fight against his own countrymen.

As soon as night fell sail was reduced, and in the morning when at eight bells Ralph came on deck with his watch he found that the whole of the upper sails had been taken off her and the topsails lowered on the cap, and the brig was only moving through the water at the rate of two or three knots an hour. He guessed that she must be just upon the track of ships, and that her object in thus taking off sail was to catch sight of vessels in the distance while she herself would be unobserved by them. During the course of the day several sail were seen passing, but all at a considerable distance. Either the captain did not think that it was safe to commence operations at present, or he did not like the look of some of the passing vessels; but at any rate he made no movement to close with any of them, and it was not until nightfall that sail was again hoisted and the brig proceeded on her course.

Ralph noticed that she carried no light, and that even the binnacle was carefully shaded so that its light could not be seen except by the helmsman. At midnight his watch went on deck, and Ralph perceived that while he had been below the sail had again been greatly reduced, and noticed that from time to time the officer on watch swept the horizon with his night-glass. He

apparently observed nothing until about two o'clock, when he stood for some time gazing intently astern. Then he turned, gave an order to a sailor, who went below, and two or three minutes later the captain came on deck. After speaking to the officer he too gazed intently astern. Then the ship's course was suddenly changed, the sheets eased off, and for half an hour she ran at a sharp angle to the course she had before been following, then she was brought up into the eye of the wind and laid to.

Although Ralph strained his eyes in the direction in which the captain had been looking, he could see nothing; but he had no doubt a sail had been seen coming up astern, and that the object of the change of course was to let her pass them without their being seen. He rather wondered that, instead of running off the wind, the captain had not put her about so as to take her position to windward instead of to leeward of the vessel behind; but he soon arrived at the object of the maneuver. There were no stars to be seen, and the bank of clouds overhead stretched away to the east, and the horizon there was entirely obscured; but to the west the sky was lighter, and a vessel would be clearly visible to the eye. The brig, therefore, in the position she had taken up could not be seen, while she herself would obtain a full view of the other as she passed her.

In an hour the other ship came along. She was a large ship, full rigged, and the French sailors, who had all come on deck, now clustered against the bulwarks and eagerly discussed her. She was about two miles to windward, and opinions differed as

to whether she was a man-of-war or an Indiaman. Ralph rather wondered that the privateer had not tried to get alongside in the darkness and take the vessel by surprise, but he understood now that there was a strong probability that the Belle Marie might have caught a tartar and have suddenly run herself under the guns of a British frigate. As soon as the vessel had passed, the braces were manned and the yards swung round, and the brig continued her course. She was brought up almost to the wind's-eye and sailed as closely as possible, so that when morning broke she should have recovered the leeway she had made and should be to windward of the vessel she was pursuing, no matter how much astern.

CHAPTER IV.
THE PRIVATEER'S RENDEZVOUS

When morning broke the vessel that the privateer had been watching in the night was seen to be three miles directly ahead. She was a large vessel, and for some time opinions differed as to whether she was a frigate or an Indiaman; but when it became quite light a patch or two in the canvas showed that she could not be a man-of-war, and all sail was at once crowded on to the privateer. The other ship at once shook out more canvas, but half an hour sufficed to show that the privateer was much the faster vessel. The stranger took in the extra canvas she had set, and continued her course as if altogether regardless of the privateer.

"They have made up their minds to fight," Jacques said to Ralph. "Now he finds that he can't outsail us he has got on to easy working canvas. She is a big ship, and I expect carries heavier metal than we do. It may be that she has troops on board."

The brig kept eating out to windward until she gained a position about a mile upon the starboard quarter of the Indiaman, then the long pivot-gun was leveled and the first shot fired. The crew had by this time all taken their places by the guns, and Ralph and the other boys brought up powder and shot from the magazine. It was not without a struggle that Ralph brought himself to do this; but he saw that a refusal would probably cost him his life, and as some one else would bring up the cartridges

in his place his refusal would not benefit his countrymen.

He had just come on deck when the gun was fired, and saw the water thrown up just under the ship's stern, and the shot was dancing away to leeward. The next shot struck the merchantman on the quarter. A moment later the vessel was brought up into the wind and a broadside of eight guns fired. Two of them struck the hull of the privateer, another wounded the mainmast, while the rest cut holes through the sails and struck the water a quarter of a mile to windward. With an oath the captain of the privateer brought his vessel up into the wind, and then payed off on the other tack.

The merchantman carried much heavier metal than he had given her credit for. As she came round too, some redcoats were seen on her deck. Apparently well satisfied with the display she had made of her strength, the ship bore off again and went quietly, on her way, while the privateer was hove to and preventer stays put to the mainmast. Ralph remained below for some time; he heard the men savagely cursing, and thought it was best for him not to attract attention at present. The sails were lowered and the brig drifted quietly all day; but about ten o'clock Ralph heard a creaking of blocks, and knew that the sails had been hoisted again. Half an hour later the watch below was ordered to come quietly on deck. Ralph went up with the rest.

For a quarter of an hour he could see nothing, and then he made out a dark mass a few hundred yards to leeward; immediately afterward the helm was put up, and the brig run

down toward the stranger. Two minutes later there was a sharp hail, followed instantly by shouts and the sound of feet; but before the crew could gain the deck and prepare for defence the brig was alongside, and a moment later her crew sprang upon the decks of the stranger. A few blows were given; but the resistance offered was slight, and in a very short time the crew were disarmed or driven below, and the vessel in the possession of the privateer. She proved to be a small bark on her way out to the Mediterranean. She carried only twenty hands and four small guns, and was laden with hardware.

The privateer's crew at once set to work upon her. At first Ralph could not understand what they were about, but he was not long in discovering. The wedges round the mainmast were knocked out, the topmast lowered to the deck, the shrouds and stays slacked off, and then the mast was lifted and carried on board the brig. As soon as this was done, the second mate of the brig with eight sailors went on board as a prize crew. Everything was made taut and trim for them by the brig's crew. The English prisoners had already been disarmed and battened down in the hold, and the prize crew then hoisted sail and prepared to take her under mizzen and foremast only to a French port. This, if she had luck, she would reach in safety, but if on the way she fell in with a British privateer or cruiser she would of course fall an easy prey.

No sooner was the bark on her way than the privateersmen set to work to lift out their injured mainmast, and to replace it with

that they had brought on board from the bark. When daylight broke anxious glances were cast round the horizon; but although a few distant sails were seen, none of these were following a course that would bring them near the brig, and the latter without sail and with her foremast alone standing would not be likely to be noticed. Ralph could not help admiring the energy with which the crew worked. Ordinarily they were by no means a smart crew, and did their work in a slow and slovenly manner; but each man now felt the importance of getting everything into order before an enemy appeared, and so well did they work that by midday the new mast was in its place, and before sunset the topmast with all its yards and gear was up and the sails ready for hoisting.

Ralph had been in a state of anxiety in the early part of the night lest he should be sent on board the bark and carried as a prisoner to France. But no one seemed to give a thought to him, and it was not until far on in the morning that the captain happened to notice him hard at work with the rest.

"Ah, are you there?" he said. "If I had thought of it I should have sent you into Best in the bark."

Ralph did not understand the words but he guessed at the meaning, and said, smiling, "I am quite content to remain where I am."

"Tell him, Jacques Clery, that I have noticed that he works willingly, and as long as he behaves well he shall have the same treatment as if he belonged really to the crew; but warn him that if he is caught at any time making a signal, or doing anything to

warn a vessel we may be approaching, his brains will be blown out at once."

Jacques translated the warning.

"That's all right," Ralph said. "Of course I should expect nothing else."

As soon as the repairs were completed the sails were hoisted and the brig proceeded on her way. In the days that followed it seemed to Ralph that the tactics of the privateer had changed, and that there was no longer any idea of making prizes. A sharp lookout was indeed kept for any English cruisers, but no attention was paid to any sail in the distance as soon as it was determined that these were not ships of war. Four days later, instead of there being as before five or six sail in sight at one point or other of the horizon, the sea was absolutely deserted. He remarked upon this to his friend Jacques. The latter laughed.

"We are out of their course now, my lad. We passed the latitude of Cape St. Vincent yesterday evening, and we are now pretty well off the coast of Africa. Nine out of ten of the ships we have seen were either bound to the Mediterranean or on their way home. Now that we have passed the mouth of the strait we shall not run across many sail."

"Where are we going to, then?" Ralph said.

"Well, I don't think there is any harm in telling you now, that we are bound south, but how far is more than I know. I expect first we shall go west and try and pick up some prizes among the islands, and after that perhaps go round the cape and lie in

wait for Indiamen on their way home. You see, one of those ships is worth a dozen of these Mediterranean traders, and one is not bothered down there as one is between the strait and the channel with your cruisers and privateers; they swarm so there that one can hardly fire a gun without bringing them down on us. I don't suppose the captain would have meddled with that Indiaman if it hadn't been that he thought the owners would be pleased by a prize being sent in so soon. As to the bark, we were obliged to take her to get a new mast. It would never have done to have started on a long cruise with a badly-injured spar."

"But I should think it would be difficult to send home prizes from the West Indies," Ralph said.

"Well, you see, although you have taken most of our islands, there are still two or three ports we can take prizes into. Beside, we can take the best goods out, and if the ship isn't worth the risk of sending to France burn her. Then, too, one can spare hands for prizes better there; because one can always ship a few fresh hands—Spaniards, Mulattos, or blacks—in their place."

"But you can't do that in the case of the Indiamen."

"No; but a single laden Indiaman is enough to pay us well for all our trouble. We can put a crew of thirty hands on board her and send her home. There is little risk of a recapture till we get near France. We have only to hoist the English flag if we do happen to meet anything."

Ralph was glad to hear that the ship was bound for the West Indies, as he thought opportunities for escape would be likely

to present themselves among the islands. Madeira was sighted three days later, and after running south for another four or five hundred miles, the brig bore away for the west. By dint of getting Jacques Clery to translate sentences into French, and of hearing nothing but that language spoken round him, Ralph had by this time begun to make considerable progress in the language. Not only was he anxious to learn it for the sake of passing away the time and making himself understood, but his efforts were greatly stimulated by the fact that if any of the crew addressed him in French a cuff on the head was generally the penalty of a failure to comprehend him. The consequence was that when six weeks after sailing the cry of land was shouted by the lookout in the tops, Ralph was able to understand almost everything that was said, and to reply in French with some fluency. As the brig sailed along the wooded shores of the first island they fell in with, Ralph was leaning against the bulwarks watching with deep interest the objects they were passing.

"I can guess what you are thinking about," Jacques Clery said, taking his place quietly by his side. "I have been through it all myself and I can guess your feelings. You are thinking how you can escape. Now, you take my advice and don't you hurry about it. You are doing well where you are. Now you begin to talk French and understand orders it's a good deal easier for you than it was, and the men are beginning to regard you as one of themselves; but you may be sure that you will be watched for a time. You see, they daren't let you go. If you were to get to one

of the English ports here we should have five or six of your men-of-war after us in no time.

"If it was not for that I don't suppose the captain would object to put you ashore. He has evidently taken a fancy to you, and is pleased with the way in which you have taken things and with your smartness and willingness. Beside, I don't think he considers you altogether as a prisoner. Running you down in the way we did in the channel wasn't like capturing you in a prize, and I think if the captain could see his way to letting you go without risk to himself he would do it. As he can't do that he will have a sharp watch kept on you, and I advise you not to be in any hurry to try to escape. You must remember if you were caught trying it they would shoot you to a certainty."

"I should be in no hurry at all, Jacques, if it were not that the brig is hunting for English vessels. You know what you would feel yourself if you were on board a ship that was capturing French craft."

"Yes, that is hard, no doubt," Jacques agreed; "and I don't say to you don't escape when you get a chance, I only say wait until the chance is a good one. Just at present we are not specially on the lookout for prizes. We are going to join two other vessels belonging to the same owners. They have been out here some time and have got a snug hiding-place somewhere, though I don't think any one on board except the captain knows where."

For three weeks the brig cruised among the islands. They had picked up no prizes in that time, as the captain did not wish

to commence operations until he had joined his consorts and obtained information from them as to the British men-of-war on the station. They had overhauled one or two native craft, purchased fish and fruit, and cautiously asked questions as to the cruisers. The answers were not satisfactory. They learned that owing to the numbers of vessels that had been captured by the privateers a very vigilant lookout was being kept; that two or three French craft that had been captured by the cruisers had been bought into the service, and were constantly in search of the headquarters of the privateers. This was bad news; for although the brig with her great spread of canvas could in light winds run away from any of the ships of war, it was by no means certain she would be able to do so from the converted privateers.

One morning two vessels—a schooner and a brig—were seen coming round a headland. The captain and officers examined them with their telescopes, and a flag was run up to the masthead. Almost immediately two answering flags were hoisted by the strangers, and an exclamation of satisfaction broke from the captain:

"We are in luck," he said. "If we had not run across them we might have had to search for the rendezvous. I have got the spot marked down on the chart, but they told me before sailing that they understood it was very difficult to find the entrance, and we might pass by within a hundred yards without noticing it."

In half an hour the ships closed up together, and the captains of the other crafts came on board in their boats. A hearty greeting

was exchanged between them and the captain of La Belle Marie, and the three then descended to the cabin. After a time they reappeared, and the visitors returned to their respective ships. Five minutes later the schooner got under way, and La Belle Marie followed her, leaving the other brig to continue her cruise alone. Toward evening the schooner ran in toward a precipitous cliff, the brig keeping close in her wake. Ralph had no doubt that they were now close to the spot the privateers used as their rendezvous, but he could detect no opening into the cliff ahead, and it looked as if the schooner was leading the way to destruction. Not until within a cable's length of the shore could any opening be discovered by the keenest eye. Then when the schooner was within her own length of the cliff her helm was put about. She came round, and in a moment later disappeared. An exclamation of surprise broke from all on board the brig, for they now saw that instead of the cliff stretching in an unbroken line it projected out at one point, and the precipitous headway concealed an extremely narrow passage behind it.

A moment later the brig imitated the maneuver of the schooner and passed in between two lofty cliffs, so close that there were but a few yards to spare on either side of her. Fifty yards ahead the channel made a sharp turn again, and they entered a basin of tranquil water three or four hundred yards across. At the further end the shore sloped gradually up, and here several large storehouses had been erected, and ways laid down for the convenience of hauling up and repairing the vessels.

"What do you think of that, youngster?" Jacques said exultantly. "A grand hiding-place is it not?"

"It is indeed," Ralph replied. "Why, they might cruise outside for weeks looking for the place and they wouldn't find it, unless a boat happened to row along at the foot of the cliffs."

As soon as the anchor was down the crew were at once given leave to go ashore, and ramble about to stretch their legs after their two months' confinement on board. Ralph was proceeding to take his place in one of the boats when the captain's eye fell upon him.

"Come below with me, young fellow," he said in French. "Jacques Clery, I shall want you too."

"I do not think there is much need of interpreting, captain," the sailor said, as he followed the others into the cabin. "The lad can get on very fairly in French now, and will certainly understand the sense of anything you may say to him."

"Look here, my lad," the captain began, "you have been fairly treated since you came on board this brig."

"I have been very kindly treated," Ralph said. "I have nothing whatever to complain of."

"And we saved your life did we not?"

"Yes, sir, after first nearly taking it," Ralph said with a smile.

"Ah, that was just as much your fault as ours. Little fish ought to get out of the way of great ones, and I don't consider we were in any way to blame in that matter. Still there is the fact in the first place we saved your life, and in the second we treated you

kindly."

"I acknowledge that, sir," Ralph said earnestly; "and I feel very grateful. You might have sent me with the crew of that bark to prison had you chosen, and I am thankful to you that you kept me on board and have treated me as one of the crew."

"Now, what I have to say to you is this lad: I know that you are comfortable enough on board, and I have noticed that Jacques here has taken you specially under his wing. You work willingly and well and have the makings of a first-class seaman in you; still I can understand that you would much rather be with your own people, and would be rather aiding them in capturing us than in aiding us to capture them. Consequently you will if you see an opportunity probably try to escape. I shall take as good care as I can to prevent you from doing so, and shall shoot you without hesitation if I catch you at it. Still you may escape, and I cannot run the risk of having this place discovered and our trade knocked on the head. I therefore offer you an alternative. You will either give me your solemn oath not in any case to reveal the existence of this place, or I will put you on shore in charge of the party who remain here, and you will stop with them a prisoner till we sail away from this cruising ground, which may be in three months or may be in a year. What do you say? Don't answer me hastily, and do not take the oath unless you are convinced you can keep it however great the temptation held out to you to betray us."

Ralph needed but a minute to consider the proposal. The

oath did not bind him in any way to abstain from making an attempt to escape, but simply to guard the secret of the privateer rendezvous. If he remained here on shore he would have no chance whatever of escape, and might moreover meet with very rough treatment from those left in charge of him. "I am quite ready to take the oath not to reveal the secret of this place, captain," he said. "I do not think that in any case after having been so kindly treated by you I should have been inclined to betray you. However as you offer me the alternative I am ready to take any oath you like of silence, and that oath I will assuredly keep whatever pressure may be laid upon me, it being understood of course that the oath in no way prevents my taking any opportunity that may present itself of making my escape."

"That is quite understood," the captain said. "That is a mere matter of business. You try to escape if you can; I shoot you if I catch you at it. But I do not think you are likely to succeed. But in justice to my employers and friends I should not be justified in running even that slight risk unless convinced that if you succeed you will keep silence as to this. Now, what oath will you take?"

"No oath can be more binding to me than my promise, sir; but at the same time I swear upon my word of honor that I will never give any information or hint that will lead any one to the discovery of this harbor."

"That will do," the captain said. "I have liked your face from the moment you came on board, and feel that I can trust your word."

"I am sure you can do that, captain," Jacques put in; "from what I have seen of the boy I am certain he will keep the promise he has made."

"Very well then," the captain said; "that is settled. You can go on shore in the next boat, and I shall advise you to take the opportunity, for I warn you that you will not get the chance of rambling on shore again until we return here next time. You need not come on board before to-morrow morning."

Half an hour later Ralph went ashore with the last batch of sailors. He soon found that a general license had been granted. A barrel of rum and several casks of wine had been broached, and the men were evidently bent upon making up for the spell of severe discipline that they had lately gone through.

Jacques Clery had gone ashore in the same boat with Ralph.

"What are you going to do, lad?"

"I am going for a walk," Ralph said. "In the first place everything is new to me and I want to see the vegetation; and in the second place I can see that in a very short time most of the hands will be drunk, and I dare say quarrelsome, and I don't want either to drink or quarrel. I think I am better away from them."

"You are right boy, and I don't care if I go too. We will take a drink of wine before we start and fill up our pockets with those biscuits. I will get the storekeeper to give us a bottle of wine to take with us, and then we shall be set up for the day. This is my first voyage in these parts; but I have heard from others of their doings, and don't care about getting a stab with a knife in a

drunken brawl. I can do my share of fighting when fighting has got to be done, but I do not care for rows of this sort. Still I know the men look forward to what you call a spree on shore, and the captain might find it difficult to preserve discipline if he did not let them have their fling occasionally."

Ralph and the sailor each took a biscuit and a draught of wine, and soon afterward started on their ramble provided with food as arranged. Both were delighted with the luxuriant vegetation, and wandered for hours through the woods admiring the flowers and fruits, abstaining, however, from tasting the latter, as for aught they knew some of the species might be poisonous. Presently, however, they came upon some bananas. Neither of them had ever seen this fruit before, but Ralph had read descriptions of it in books, Jacques had heard of it from sailors who had visited the West Indies before. They therefore cut some bunches. "Now we will bring ourselves to an anchor and dine. Time must be getting on, and my appetite tells me that it must have struck eight bells." Jacques sat down on the ground, and was about to throw himself full length when Ralph observed a movement among the dead leaves; an instant later the head of a snake was raised threateningly within striking distance of Jacques Clery's neck as he sank backward. Ralph gave a short cry—too late, however, to arrest the sailor's movements—and at the same moment sprang forward and came down with both feet upon the snake.

"What on earth are you doing?" Jacques asked as he scrambled to his feet. No answer was made to his question, but

he saw at once that Ralph was stamping upon the writhing folds of a snake. In a minute the motion ceased.

"That was a close shave, Jacques," Ralph said smiling, though his face was pale with the sudden excitement. "I did not see it until too late to give you warning. It was just the fraction of a second, and even as I jumped I thought he would strike your neck before my boot came on him."

"You saved my life, lad," the other said huskily, trembling from head to foot, as he saw how narrowly indeed he had escaped from death. "I have been in some hard fights in my time, but I don't know that ever I felt as I feel now. I feel cold from head to foot, and I believe that a child could knock me down. Give me your hand, lad. It was splendidly done. If you had stopped for half a moment to think I should have been a dead man. Good heavens! what an escape I had."

"I am glad to have been of service for once. You have been so kind to me since I came aboard the brig that it is fair that I should do you a good turn for once. I am not surprised you are shaken, for I feel so myself. We had better both have a drink of wine, and then we can see about our meal."

"No more lying down on the ground for me," the sailor said. "Once is enough of such a thing as that. However, hand me the bottle. I shall feel better after that."

Ralph looked about and presently discovered an open space, free from fallen leaves or any other shelter for a lurking snake, and persuaded Jacques to sit down and eat his biscuit and bananas

in comfort. The sailor did so, but the manner in which his glances kept wandering round him in search of snakes showed that he had not yet recovered his equanimity. When they had finished their meal Ralph proposed that they should climb up to the highest point of ground they could find, and take a view over the island. Two hours' walking took them to the top of a lofty hill. From the summit they were enabled to obtain a distant view. The island was, they judged, some seven or eight miles across, and fully twice that length. Several small islands lay within a few miles distant, and high land rose twenty miles off.

"This must be a large island," Ralph said. "Do you know where we are, Jacques?"

"I have no idea whatever," the sailor said; "and I don't suppose any one on board, except the officers, has, any more than me. The charts are all in the captain's cabin; and I know no more of the geography of these islands than I do of the South Seas, and that's nothing. It's quite right to keep it dark; because, though I don't suppose many fellows on board any of the three craft would split upon us if he were captured, because, you see, we each have a share in the profits of the voyage as well as our regular pay, and, of course, we should lose that if those storehouses, which are pretty well choked up with goods, were to get taken, there's never any saying what some mean scamp might do if he were offered a handsome reward. So the fewer as knows the secret the better."

"Look Jacques! Look at that full-rigged ship that has just

come out from behind that island. She looks to me like a frigate."

"And that she is," the sailor replied. "Carries forty guns, I should say, by her size. English, no doubt. Well, we had better go down again, lad. I must report to the captain that this craft is cruising in these waters. It will be dark before we are back, and I don't want to be in the woods after dark; there's no saying what one might tread on. I thought that we would stretch ourselves out under the trees for to-night and go aboard in the morning, but I feel different now. Bless you, I should never close an eye. So I propose as we goes down so as not to be noticed by them chaps up at the store, and then gets hold of a boat and rows on board quiet."

"I am quite willing to do that Jacques. I don't think I should get much sleep either in the woods."

"No, I guess not, lad. Come along; the sun is halfway down already, and I would not be left in these woods after dark, not for six months' pay. The thought of that snake makes me crawl all over. Who would have thought now, when I lugged you in over the bowsprit of La Belle Marie that night in the channel, that you were going to save my life some day. Well, I don't suppose, lad, I shall ever get quits with you, but if there is a chance you can count upon me. You come to me any night and say I am going to escape, Jacques, and I will help you to do it, even if they riddle me with bullets five minutes afterward."

"I shall never ask that of you, Jacques," Ralph said warmly. "I consider we are quits now, though you may not. Indeed, I can tell

you that I don't consider that two months of kindness are wiped out by just taking a jump on to the back of a snake."

There were loud sounds of shouting, singing, and quarreling as they passed near the great fires that were blazing near the storehouse. They reached the waterside without notice, and taking a boat rowed off to the brig. The captain looked over the side:

"Who is that?"

"Jacques Clery and the English lad, captain."

"You got tired of the noise on shore, I suppose?" the captain said.

"Not exactly that, captain, for we have not been near the others at all. We took a long walk through the woods up to the top of the hill in the middle of the island and we came back for two reasons. The first because I have been so badly scared by a snake, who would have bit me had not this young fellow leaped on to its back just as he was about to strike me in the neck, that I would not have slept on the ground for anything; and, in the second place, we came to tell you that from the top of the hill we saw a large frigate—English, I should say, from the cut of her sails—five or six miles off on the other side of the island, and I thought you ought to know about her at once."

"Thank you, Jacques; that is important. I was going to sail in the morning, but we must not stir as long as she is in the neighborhood. So this young fellow saved your life, did he?"

"That he did, captain; and it was the quickest thing you ever

saw. I was just lying down at full length when he caught sight of the snake. There was no time to stop me; no time even to cry out. He just jumped on a sudden and came down on the brute as it was on the point of striking. Had he stopped for one quarter of a second I should have been a dead man hours ago."

"That was a near escape indeed, Jacques. Are they pretty quiet there on shore? I heard them shouting several times."

"They seem quarreling a bit, captain; but they are sure to do that with all that liquor on hand."

"They won't come to much harm," the captain said. "I gave the strictest orders that all weapons should be left behind before they landed, and that any man carrying even a knife would have his leave stopped during the rest of the cruise. Beside, the first mate is there to look after them. I will go ashore myself at daybreak and take a look round from the top of that hill. If that frigate is still cruising about near the island it must be because they have got some sort of an idea of the whereabouts of our hiding place. We must wait till she moves away. It won't do to risk anything."

Upon the following morning the captain and Jacques, accompanied by Ralph, landed. They passed close by the storehouse, and saw the men still asleep round the extinguished fires. The captain called out the storekeeper:

"You can serve out one pannikin of wine to each man," he said, "but no more. They will want that to pull them together. Tell the first mate to get them on board as soon as possible, and set them to work to tidy up the ship and get everything ready for

setting sail at a moment's notice. Tell him an English frigate is reported as close to the island. I am going up to look after her."

Two hours' steady walking took them to the top of the hill. There were no signs of any vessel as far as they could see. The captain, who had brought his glass with him, carefully examined every island in sight. Presently he uttered an exclamation:

"There are three boats rowing together close under the cliffs there," he said, pointing to the nearest island. "No doubt the frigate is lying behind it. They must be searching for some concealed harbor like ours. *Peste!* this is awkward. What do you think, Jacques?"

"I should say you were right in what you said last night, captain. They must have got an idea that our rendezvous is somewhere hereabouts, though they don't know for certain where, and they are searching all the island round. If they come along here like that we shall be caught in a trap. A vessel might sail close by without suspecting there was an entrance here, however hard they might be looking for it; but if they send boats rowing along the shore they couldn't help finding it. Still, there is nothing to prevent our sailing away now, as the island is between us and them."

"That is so," the captain said. "But if they come while we are away, in the first place they would capture all the booty in the stores, and in the second place they might lie quiet in the harbor and would sink the other ships when they returned. I will go down to the port again, Jacques, and will send up two of the men from

the storehouse to keep watch here, turn and turn about. Do you remain here until you are relieved. I will leave my glass with you. If there is anything fresh, leave the boy on watch and come down with the news yourself. I must talk this matter over with the mates. We have no direct interest in the stores, but we must do the best we can for our owners."

Jacques and Ralph watched the distant boats through the glass until they disappeared round the end of the island, then turned the glass seaward. Jacques was using it at the time. "See!" he exclaimed, "there are three sails together there."

"I can see them plainly enough," Ralph said. "What do you make them out to be?"

"A schooner, a brig, and a three-masted vessel. They are lying close together, and I fancy boats are passing between them. However, I couldn't swear to that. They must be fifteen miles away. I expect they are our consorts, and a merchantman they have captured."

"Can they see them from the other side of that island?" Ralph asked excitedly.

"I should say they could," Jacques replied after pausing to calculate the line of sight. "It depends how far round the frigate is lying, and how close in shore. But if they have sent any one up on the hill there, of course they can make them out as plainly as we can." Jacques handed the glass to Ralph.

"Yes, I think I can make out boats, Jacques. What do you suppose they are doing?"

"Most likely they are transferring the valuable part of her cargo on board."

"What will they do with her then?"

"I expect they will let her go; but of course that depends whether she is a new ship and worth taking the risk of carrying her to France."

"They don't burn or sink her, then?"

"No; there would be no good in that; for they wouldn't know what to do with the crew. Of course they don't want the bother of prisoners here, and they wouldn't want to turn them adrift in the boats. They might land on some island near and see us going and coming here, and carry the news to some of your cruisers. No, I expect they will take what is valuable and let them go—that is if the ship isn't worth sending home. I suppose that is so in this case; for if they were going to put a prize crew on board and send it to France, they would not be transferring the cargo. Well, we shall see in another half hour."

CHAPTER V.
THE BRITISH CRUISERS

An hour passed. During this time the watchers on the hill saw that the brig had been lying alongside the three-masted vessel, and felt sure that the cargo was being transferred, then the merchantman's sails were hoisted, and she slowly sailed away. For another hour the other two crafts lay motionless, then they hoisted sail and headed for the island. There was a brisk, steady wind blowing, and they came along fast through the water.

"We shall soon see now whether your frigate has made them out," Jacques said; "but I will not wait any longer but will go and tell the captain what is going on. In another hour the others will be up here to relieve you, then you can bring down the latest news."

Left alone, Ralph watched anxiously the progress of the distant vessels, turning the glass frequently toward the other island, beyond the end of which he momentarily expected to see the white sails of the frigate appear. An hour passed. The schooner and the brig were now within about four miles of the nearest point of the island, and still there were no signs of the English ship. Presently he heard voices behind him, and two French sailors came up. Ralph was now free to return, but he thought he had better wait until the brig and schooner reached a point where they would be hidden by the island from the sight of

any-one who might be watching on the hill six miles away.

In another half-hour they had reached this point. No signs had been seen of the frigate, and Ralph felt sure that she must have been anchored in some bay whose headland prevented her seeing the approaching craft; for had she noticed them she would assuredly have set out to intercept them before they reached the island, which lay almost dead to windward of them. He was just turning to go when one of the men gave a sudden exclamation. He turned round again and saw the frigate just appearing from behind the other island. She was close-hauled, and it was soon evident by her course that she was beating up for the point round which the other two ships had disappeared.

Ralph was puzzled at this; for if she had made out the brig and schooner, her natural course would have been to have made for the other end of the island, so as to cut them off as they sailed past it; whereas they would now, when they gained the extremity of the island, find themselves five or six miles astern of the other two craft. The French sailors were equally puzzled, and there was a hot argument between them; but they finally concluded that her appearance at that moment must be accidental, and she could not have made out the privateers. They had just told Ralph to run down with the news to the harbor when a light was thrown upon the mystery; for from the other end of the island from which the frigate had emerged a large schooner appeared. Every sail was set, and her course was directed toward this other end of the island upon which the watchers were standing. The two French

sailors burst out into a torrent of oaths, expressive of surprise and alarm; for it was evident that from the course the schooner was taking she intended to intercept the two privateers, and engage them until the frigate came to her assistance.

"Run, boy! run for your life!" one of them exclaimed, "and tell the captain. But no; wait a moment," and he directed the glass upon the schooner. "A thousand curses!" he exclaimed. "It is the Cerf schooner the English captured from us six months ago. She is the fastest craft in these waters. Tell the captain that I am coming after you, but your legs will beat mine."

Ralph dashed off at full speed, but as soon as he had fairly distanced the French sailor he began to run more slowly. For the moment he had so entered into the feelings of his companions that he had identified himself with them, but now he had time to think, his sympathies swung round to the English ship. He did not particularly want La Belle Marie to be captured; for he had been so well treated on board her that he felt no ill-will toward her. But her capture meant his deliverance.

He thought over the matter as he ran, and wondered first why the frigate did not take the line to cut the privateers off, instead of going round by the other end of the island. He could only suppose that it was because the schooner was the fastest vessel, and was more likely to arrive in time at the point. Beside, if she showed there before the privateers reached the point they might double back again, and the frigate would make the other end of the island before they were halfway back. It might be, too, that the

captain has suspected the truth, knowing that the privateers had a rendezvous somewhere in that neighborhood, and that his object in remaining so long behind the island was to give them time to enter their port in ignorance of his being in the neighborhood. At any rate, the great thing was, that the schooner and brig should enter the little harbor before knowing that they were pursued. Once in, it would be impossible for them to get out again and beat off shore with the wind blowing dead on the land, before both the schooner and frigate had rounded their respective ends of the island.

Therefore, although Ralph ran fast enough to keep well ahead of the sailor, he made no effort to keep up a greater rate of speed than was necessary for this. As soon as he reached the shore a boat rowed off from the brig to fetch him. He saw with satisfaction that although the men were all on board, no preparations were made for getting under way at once; and, indeed, the captain would have no anxiety for his own ship, as he would know that the privateers, if they saw the frigate coming out to meet them, would sail right away from the island, and the frigate would be sure to pursue until out of sight of land.

"What news, boy?" the captain asked as the boat came close alongside. "Is the frigate in chase of the others?"

"Yes, sir," Ralph replied; "the frigate and a schooner are both in chase."

"Which way are they bearing?"

"The privateers do not know they are chased sir. The frigate

did not show round the island over there until the schooner and brig were hidden behind the end of this island. She made toward the western end, and the schooner is making for the eastern end. The sailors who came up told me to tell you that the schooner is the Cerf, one of the fastest vessels out here."

The captain uttered an exclamation of dismay, which was echoed by those standing round him.

"Row out through the entrance," he shouted to the coxswain of the boat, "and warn the others of the danger! Tell them to make straight out. If they come in here, we shall all be caught in a trap together!"

The oars dipped in the water, but before the boat was fairly in motion there was an exclamation, for the head sail of the schooner glided in past the projecting cliff. A moment later the whole vessel came into view.

"Bring the boat back alongside!" the captain shouted. "I will go on board her at once. She may get out in time yet!"

As the schooner rounded up her sails came down, and she headed straight toward the brig. The captain of the Belle Marie stood up in the stern-sheet of the boat, shouting and waving his hands and gesticulating to them to get up sail again. Those on board the schooner looked on in surprise, unable to guess his meaning.

"There are two English cruisers, one coming round each end of the island!" he shouted as he approached the schooner. "Get out again if you can, otherwise they must catch us all in here!"

The captain in the schooner at once saw the emergency, and roared out orders. The boats were all lowered at once, and the men tumbled on board. Hawsers were lowered from the bows, and they began at once to tow her head round, for there was not a breath of wind in the land-locked harbor.

"How much time have we got?" the captain asked as the schooner's head came slowly round.

"I don't know," the other captain replied. "It's a question of minutes, anyhow. Ah, here is the brig!" and the boat dashed forward and he gave similar orders to those that had been given to the schooner.

"Get them both round!" the captain shouted. "I will row out through the entrance and give you warning if these accursed cruisers are in sight."

The boat dashed through the narrow entrance, and at once felt the full force of the breeze. "Dead on shore," the captain muttered bitterly. "They will have to work right out into the arms of one or other of them."

They rowed a hundred yards out, when, beyond the furthermost point they could see to the east, the sails of the schooner were perceived.

"Take her round," the captain said sharply. "It's too late now, we have got to fight for it."

They rowed back through the entrance. The schooner slowly towed by her boats was approaching.

"It is no use," the captain said, "you are too late. The schooner

has rounded the end of the island, and with this breeze will be here in half an hour. You never can work out in time. Beside, they would see you come out; and even if you got away, which you couldn't do, they would come back and capture the depot. We have got to fight for it, that's evident; and the boats of a fleet could hardly make their way in here. We had best get the three craft moored with their broadsides to the entrance. We will blow the boats to tinder if they try to come in, and then we can load up with all the most valuable goods and slip out at night-time. That is our only chance."

The captain of the schooner jumped into the boat, and they again rowed out into the entrance. He saw at once that the other's advice was the only one to be followed. It would be impossible to beat off the shore before the schooner came up and while they were talking the frigate appeared round the other end of the island. They therefore returned into the harbor. The Belle Marie's anchor was raised, and the three vessels moored head and stern across the harbor, a hundred yards from the entrance. As soon as this was done strong parties were sent ashore from each of the vessels, and six heavy ship's guns that had been landed from some captured vessel were dragged from their place near the storehouse and planted on the heights, so as to sweep the narrow channel.

It was late in the evening before this was finished, and an earthwork thrown up to shelter the men working the guns from musketry fire. In the meantime the two ships of war had met

outside, and again separating cruised several times from end to end of the rocky wall, evidently searching for the entrance through which the privateers they had been pursuing had so suddenly disappeared. In the morning the French sailors were at work early, and two or three strong chains were fastened across the mouth of the passage.

"Now," the captain of the Belle Marie said exultantly, as he regained the deck of his ship, "we are ready to give them a warm reception. The boats of all the British cruisers on the station would never force their way through that gap."

Ralph had not been called upon to assist in the work of preparation, he and Jacques having done their day's work on the journey to the top of the hill and back. He saw from the exultation in the faces of the Frenchmen that they considered their position was impregnable, and he shuddered at the thought of the terrible carnage that would ensue if the boats of the English vessels should try to force an entrance. The following morning a lookout on the cliffs reported that two boats had left the ships and were rowing toward the shore. On reaching the foot of the cliffs they rowed along abreast at a distance of thirty or forty yards of the shores. They stopped rowing at the mouth of the entrance, and were suddenly hailed by the captain of the schooner, who was standing on the cliff above.

"If you try to enter," he said, "you will be destroyed at once. We don't want to harm you if you will leave us alone; but we have guns enough to blow a whole fleet out of water, and will

use them if we are driven to it."

"Thank you for your warning," a voice shouted back from the boats, and then an order was given, and they rowed back to the ships.

"Well, have you found the place, Lieutenant Pearson?" the captain of the frigate asked as the young lieutenant stepped on deck.

"Yes, sir, we have found it. It is just where the boat turned and came out again."

"I can see no signs of it now," the captain said, examining the shore with his telescope.

"No, sir; you wouldn't until you were within a hundred yards of it. But rowing close in as we were we saw it some time before we got there. The rocks overlap each other, and there is a narrow channel some fifty yards long between them. Apparently this makes a sharp turn at the other end and opens out. We saw nothing of the vessels we were chasing yesterday, but on high ground facing the channel there is a battery of six guns planted so as to rake anything coming in. There are some chains across the end. While we were lying on our oars there we were hailed." And he then repeated the warning that had been given.

"Nasty place to get into—eh?" the captain said thoughtfully.

"Very nasty, sir. You see, the guns would play right down into the channel; then there are the chains to break down, and perhaps more batteries, and certainly the ships to tackle when we get inside."

"Is there width for the frigate to enter?" the captain asked.

"Just width, I should say, and no more, sir. We should certainly have to get the yards braced fore and aft, but the ship herself would go through with something to spare, I should say."

"What depth of water is there close in shore?"

"Plenty of depth sir, right up to the foot of the cliffs; but of course I can say nothing as to the depth in the channel."

"No, of course not," the captain said. "Well, it's something that we have run these pests to earth at last, but I see it is going to be no easy matter to get at them."

The captain now signaled to the captain of the schooner to come on board, and when he did so the two officers retired to the cabin together and had a long consultation. The young officer on coming on deck got into his boat, and taking Lieutenant Pearson with him rowed for the cliffs, a few hundred yards to the west of the inlet. Here they could obtain a view of the channel and its surroundings. Not a man was to be seen. The muzzles of the six guns pointed menacingly down into the passage, and the chains could be seen just above the water's edge.

"I think we will go back now, Mr. Pearson. I really think we ought to be very much obliged to those fellows for not sinking us. I wonder what was their motive in letting us off so easily?"

"I suppose they feel pretty confident that our report is not likely to encourage an attack, and they think that if they were to blow us to pieces it would only make Captain Wilson the more determined to destroy them. At least that is the conclusion I came

to as I rowed back last time."

"Yes, I should think that is it," the young captain said. "It is certainly as awkward a looking place to attack in boats as I ever saw. Of course were it not for the chains my vessel could get in, and I dare say she has been in there many a time before we captured her, but it would be a very risky thing to take the frigate in without knowing anything of the depth of water either in the channel or inside."

Both returned to the frigate. "Mr. Pearson's report is fully borne out, Captain Wilson. It would be a most desperate enterprise to attack with our boats. Half of them would be sunk before they got to the chains; and even if they got past them, which I doubt, there is no saying what difficulties and obstacles may be inside."

"And now about the frigate, Captain Chambers."

"Well, sir, that is for you to decide. I am quite ready to take the schooner in; though with the plunging power of that battery raking her fore and aft I say fairly that it would be a desperate enterprise, and if she had not sufficient way upon her to carry away the chains nothing could save her. As to the frigate, it seems to me that she would run an equal risk with the schooner, with the additional danger that there may not be water enough for her."

"Well, it certainly doesn't seem to be an easy nut to crack," Captain Wilson said. "As we agreed before you started, we should not be justified in risking both our vessels in assaulting a place which is certainly extremely formidable, and where there

may not be water enough for the frigate to float. Still the question remains, what is to be done? It is no use anchoring here and trying to starve them out; they may have provisions enough to last them for years, for anything we know. If the weather were to turn bad we should have to make off at once; it would never do to be caught in a hurricane with such a coast as that on our lee. I might send you to Port Royal with a letter to the admiral, asking him to send us two or three more ships; but I don't like doing that when it is a mere question of capturing two rascally privateers."

"I think the admiral would be glad to send them," the younger captain said; "for these two vessels have done a tremendous lot of damage during the last year. I believe that upward of twenty ships have reported being boarded and stripped by them."

"But if they came what could they do?" Captain Wilson asked. "You see we consider it is not worth the risk of throwing away two ships two force this passage, still less would it be to risk four."

"That is so, no doubt," Captain Chambers agreed. "I should suggest that however many of us there may be we should all draw off and keep a watch at a distance. Of course it would be necessary to approach at night, and to lie behind the island somewhere in the daytime just as we did yesterday, for from the top of that hill they can see any distance round."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.