

**ROBERT
MICHAEL
BALLANTYNE**

THE BATTLE AND THE
BREEZE

Robert Michael Ballantyne

The Battle and the Breeze

«Public Domain»

Ballantyne R.

The Battle and the Breeze / R. Ballantyne — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	9
Chapter Three.	13
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	14

R. M. Ballantyne

The Battle and the Breeze

Chapter One.

Touches on our Hero's Early Life, Experiences, and Adventures

Bill Bowls was the most amiable, gentle, kindly, and modest fellow that ever trod the deck of a man-of-war. He was also one of the most lion-hearted men in the Navy.

When Bill was a baby—a round-faced, large-eyed, fat-legged baby, as unlike to the bronzed, whiskered, strapping seaman who went by the name of “Fighting Bill” as a jackdaw is to a marlinespike—when Bill was a baby, his father used to say he was just cut out for a sailor; and he was right, for the urchin was overflowing with vigour and muscular energy. He was utterly reckless, and very earnest—we might almost say *desperately* earnest. Whatever he undertook to do he did “with a will.” He spoke with a will, listened with a will, laughed, yelled, ate, slept, wrought, and fought with a will. In short, he was a splendid little fellow, and therefore, as his father wisely said, was just cut out for a sailor.

Bill seemed to hold the same opinion, for he took to the water quite naturally from the very commencement of life. He laughed with glee when his mother used to put him into the washtub, and howled with rage when she took him out. Dancing bareheaded under heavy rain was his delight, wading in ponds and rivers was his common practice, and tumbling into deep pools was his most ordinary mishap. No wonder, then, that Bill learned at an early age to swim, and also to fear nothing whatever, except a blowing-up from his father. He feared that, but he did not often get it, because, although full of mischief as an egg is full of meat, he was good-humoured and bidable, and, like all lion-hearted fellows, he had little or no malice in him.

He began his professional career very early in life. When in after years he talked to his comrades on this subject, he used to say—

“Yes, mates, I did begin to study navigation w'en I was about two foot high—more or less—an' I tell 'e what it is, there's nothin' like takin' old Father Time by the forelock. I was about four year old when I took my first start in the nautical way; and p'r'aps ye won't believe it, but it's a fact, I launched my first ship myself; owned her; commanded and navigated her, and was wrecked on my first voyage. It happened this way; my father was a mill-wright, he was, and lived near a small lake, where I used to splutter about a good deal. One day I got hold of a big plank, launched it after half an hour o' the hardest work I ever had, got on it with a bit of broken palm for an oar, an' shoved off into deep water. It was a splendid burst! Away I went with my heart in my mouth and my feet in the water tryin' to steady myself, but as ill luck would have it, just as I had got my ship on an even keel an' was beginnin' to dip my oar with great caution, a squall came down the lake, caught me on the starboard quarter, and threw me on my beam-ends. Of coorse I went sowse into the water, and had only time to give out one awful yell when the water shut me up. Fortnitly my father heard me; jumped in and pulled me out, but instead of kicking me or blowin' me up, he told me that I should have kept my weather-eye open an' met the squall head to wind. Then he got hold of the plank and made me try it again, and didn't leave me till I was able to paddle about on that plank almost as well as any Eskimo in his skin canoe. My good old dad finished the lesson by tellin' me to keep always *in shoal water till I could swim*, and to look out for squalls in future! It was lucky for me that I had learned to obey him, for many a time I was capsized after that, when nobody was near me, but bein' always in shoal water, I managed to scramble ashore.”

As Bill Bows began life so he continued it. He went to sea in good earnest when quite a boy and spent his first years in the coasting trade, in which rough service he became a thorough seaman, and was wrecked several times on various parts of our stormy shores. On reaching man's estate he turned a longing eye to foreign lands, and in course of time visited some of the most distant parts of the globe, so that he may be said to have been a great traveller before his whiskers were darker than a lady's eyebrows.

During these voyages, as a matter of course, he experienced great variety of fortune. He had faced the wildest of storms, and bathed in the beams of the brightest sunshine. He was as familiar with wreck as with rations; every species of nautical disaster had befallen him; typhoons, cyclones, and simooms had done their worst to him, but they could not kill him, for Bill bore a sort of charmed life, and invariably turned up again, no matter how many of his shipmates went down. Despite the rough experiences of his career he was as fresh and good-looking a young fellow as one would wish to see.

Before proceeding with the narrative of his life, we shall give just one specimen of his experiences while he was in the merchant service.

Having joined a ship bound for China, he set sail with the proverbial light heart and light pair of breeches, to which we may add light pockets. His heart soon became somewhat heavier when he discovered that his captain was a tyrant, whose chief joy appeared to consist in making other people miserable. Bill Bows's nature, however was adaptable, so that although his spirits were a little subdued, they were not crushed. He was wont to console himself, and his comrades, with the remark that this state of things couldn't last for ever, that the voyage would come to an end some time or other, and that men should never say die as long as there remained a shot in the locker!

That voyage did come to an end much sooner than he or the tyrannical captain expected!

One evening our hero stood near the binnacle talking to the steersman, a sturdy middle-aged sailor, whose breadth appeared to be nearly equal to his length.

"Tom Riggles," said Bill, somewhat abruptly, "we're goin' to have dirty weather."

"That's so, lad, I'm not goin' to deny it," replied Tom, as he turned the wheel a little to windward:

Most landsmen would have supposed that Bill's remark should have been, "We *have* got dirty weather," for at the time he spoke the good ship was bending down before a stiff breeze, which caused the dark sea to dash over her bulwarks and sweep the decks continually, while thick clouds, the colour of pea-soup, were scudding across the sky; but seafaring men spoke of it as a "capful of wind," and Bill's remark was founded on the fact that, for an hour past, the gale had been increasing, and the appearance of sea and sky was becoming more threatening.

That night the captain stood for hours holding on to the weather-shrouds of the mizzen-mast without uttering a word to any one, except that now and then, at long intervals, he asked the steersman how the ship's head lay. Dark although the sky was, it did not seem so threatening as did the countenance of the man who commanded the vessel.

Already the ship was scudding before the wind, with only the smallest rag of canvas hoisted, yet she rose on the great waves and plunged madly into the hollows between with a violence that almost tore the masts out of her. The chief-mate stood by the wheel assisting the steersman; the crew clustered on the starboard side of the forecabin, casting uneasy glances now at the chaos of foaming water ahead, and then at the face of their captain, which was occasionally seen in the pale light of a stray moonbeam. In ordinary circumstances these men would have smiled at the storm, but they had unusual cause for anxiety at that time, for they knew that the captain was a drunkard, and, from the short experience they had already had of him, they feared that he was not capable of managing the ship.

"Had we not better keep her a point more to the south'ard, sir?" said the mate to the captain, respectfully touching his cap; "reefs are said to be numerous here about."

"No, Mister Wilson," answered the captain, with the gruff air of a man who assumes and asserts that he knows what he is about, and does not want advice.

“Keep her a point to the west,” he added, turning to the steersman.

There was a cry at that moment—a cry such as might have chilled the blood in the stoutest heart—

“Rocks ahead!”

“Port! port! hard-a-port!” shouted the men. Their hoarse voices rose above the gale, but not above the terrible roar of the surf, which now mingled with the din of the storm.

The order was repeated by the mate, who sprang to the wheel and assisted in obeying it. Round came the gallant ship with a magnificent sweep, and in another moment she would have been head to wind, when a sudden squall burst upon her broadside and threw her on her beam-ends.

When this happened the mate sprang to the companion-hatch to get an axe, intending to cut the weather-shrouds so that the masts might go overboard and allow the ship to right herself, for, as she then lay, the water was pouring into her. Tom Riggles was, when she heeled over, thrown violently against the mate, and both men rolled to leeward. This accident was the means of saving them for the time, for just then the mizzen rigging gave way, the mast snapped across, and the captain and some of the men who had been hastening aft were swept with the wreck into the sea.

A few minutes elapsed ere Tom and the mate gained a place of partial security on the poop. The scene that met their gaze there was terrible beyond description. Not far ahead the sea roared in irresistible fury on a reef of rocks, towards which the ship was slowly drifting. The light of the moon was just sufficient to show that a few of the men were still clinging to the rail of the forecabin, and that the rigging of the main and foremasts still held fast.

“Have you got the hatchet yet?” asked Tom of the mate, who clung to a belaying-pin close behind him.

“Ay, but what matters it whether we strike the rocks on our beam-ends or an even keel?”

The mate spoke in the tones of a man who desperately dares the fate which he cannot avoid.

“Here! let me have it!” cried Tom.

He seized the hatchet as he spoke and clambered to the gangway. A few strokes sufficed to cut the overstrained ropes, and the mainmast snapped off with a loud report, and the ship slowly righted.

“Hold on!” shouted Tom to a man who appeared to be slipping off the bulwarks into the sea.

As no reply was given, the sailor boldly leapt forward, caught the man by the collar, and dragged him into a position of safety.

“Why, Bill, my boy, is’t you?” exclaimed the worthy man in a tone of surprise, as he looked at the face of our hero, who lay on the deck at his feet; but poor Bill made no reply, and it was not until a glass of rum had been poured down his throat by his deliverer that he began to recover.

Several of the crew who had clung to different parts of the wreck now came aft one by one, until most of the survivors were grouped together near the wheel, awaiting in silence the shock which they knew must inevitably take place in the course of a few minutes, for the ship, having righted, now drifted with greater rapidity to her doom.

It was an awful moment for these miserable men! If they could have only vented their feelings in vigorous action it would have been some relief, but this was impossible, for wave after wave washed over the stern and swept the decks, obliging them to hold on for their lives.

At last the shock came. With a terrible crash the good ship struck and recoiled, quivering in every plank. On the back of another wave she was lifted up, and again cast on the cruel rocks. There was a sound of rending wood and snapping cordage, and next moment the foremast was in the sea, tossing violently, and beating against the ship’s side, to which it was still attached by part of the rigging. Three of the men who had clung to the shrouds of the foremast were swept overboard and drowned. Once more the wreck recoiled, rose again on a towering billow, and was launched on the rocks with such violence that she was forced forward and upwards several yards, and remained fixed.

Slight although this change was for the better, it sufficed to infuse hope into the hearts of the hitherto despairing sailors. The dread of being instantly dashed to pieces was removed, and with one consent they scrambled to the bow to see if there was any chance of reaching the shore.

Clinging to the fore-part of the ship they found the cook, a negro, whose right arm supported the insensible form of a woman—the only woman on board that ship. She was the wife of the carpenter. Her husband had been among the first of those who were swept overboard and drowned.

“Hold on to her, massa,” exclaimed the cook; “my arm a’most brok.”

The mate, to whom he appealed, at once grasped the woman, and was about to attempt to drag her under the lee of the caboose, when the vessel slipped off the rocks into the sea, parted amidships, and was instantly overwhelmed.

For some minutes Bill Bows struggled powerfully to gain the shore, but the force of the boiling water was such that he was as helpless as if he had been a mere infant; his strength, great though it was, began to fail; several severe blows that he received from portions of the wreck nearly stunned him, and he felt the stupor that preceded death overpowering him, when he was providentially cast upon a ledge of rock. Against the same ledge most of his shipmates were dashed by the waves and killed, but he was thrown upon it softly. Retaining sufficient reason to realise his position, he clambered further up the rocks, and uttered an earnest “Thank God!” as he fell down exhausted beyond the reach of the angry waves.

Soon, however, his energies began to revive, and his first impulse, when thought and strength returned, was to rise and stagger down to the rocks, to assist if possible, any of his shipmates who might have been cast ashore. He found only one, who was lying in a state of insensibility on a little strip of sand. The waves had just cast him there, and another towering billow approached, which would infallibly have washed him away, had not Bill rushed forward and dragged him out of danger.

It proved to be his friend Tom Riggles. Finding that he was not quite dead, Bill set to work with all his energy to revive him, and was so successful that in half-an-hour the sturdy seaman was enabled to sit up and gaze round him with the stupid expression of a tipsy man.

“Come, cheer up,” said Bill, clapping him on the back; “you’ll be all right in a short while.”

“Wot’s to do?” said Tom, staring at his rescuer.

“You’re all right,” repeated Bill. “One good turn deserves another, Tom. You saved my life a few minutes ago, and now I’ve hauled you out o’ the water, old boy.”

The sailor’s faculties seemed to return quickly on hearing this. He endeavoured to rise, exclaiming—

“Any more saved?”

“I fear not,” answered Bill sadly, shaking his head.

“Let’s go see,” cried Tom, staggering along the beach in search of his shipmates; but none were found; all had perished, and their bodies were swept away far from the spot where the ship had met her doom.

At daybreak it was discovered that the ship had struck on a low rocky islet on which there was little or no vegetation. Here for three weeks the two shipwrecked sailors lived in great privation, exposed to the inclemency of the weather, and subsisting chiefly on shell-fish. They had almost given way to despair, when a passing vessel observed them, took them off, and conveyed them in safety to their native land.

Such was one of the incidents in our hero’s career.

Chapter Two. Commences the Story

About the beginning of the present century, during the height of the war with France, the little fishing village of Fairway was thrown into a state of considerable alarm by the appearance of a ship of war off the coast, and the landing therefrom of a body of blue-jackets. At that time it was the barbarous custom to impress men, willing or not willing, into the Royal Navy. The more effective, and at the same time just, method of enrolling men in a naval reserve force had not occurred to our rulers, and, as a natural consequence, the inhabitants of sea-port towns and fishing villages were on the constant look-out for the press-gang.

At the time when the man-of-war's boat rowed alongside of the little jetty of Fairway, an interesting couple chanced to be seated in a bower at the back of a very small but particularly neat cottage near the shore. The bower was in keeping with its surroundings, being the half of an old boat set up on end. Roses and honeysuckle were trained up the sides of it, and these, mingling their fragrance with the smell of tar, diffused an agreeable odour around. The couple referred to sat very close to each other, and appeared to be engaged in conversation of a confidential nature. One was a fair and rather pretty girl of the fishing community. The other was a stout and uncommonly handsome man of five-and-twenty, apparently belonging to the same class, but there was more of the regular sailor than the fisherman in his costume and appearance. In regard to their conversation, it may be well, perhaps, to let them speak for themselves.

"I tell 'ee wot it is, Nelly Blyth," said the man, in a somewhat stern tone of voice; "it won't suit me to dilly-dally in this here fashion any longer. You've kept me hanging off and on until I have lost my chance of gettin' to be mate of a Noocastle collier; an' here I am now, with nothin' to do, yawin' about like a Dutchman in a heavy swell, an' feelin' ashamed of myself."

"Don't be so hasty, Bill," replied the girl, glancing up at her lover's face with an arch smile; "what would you have?"

"What would I have?" repeated the sailor, in a tone of mingled surprise and exasperation. "Well, I never—no, I never did see nothin' like you women for bamboozlin' men. It seems to me you're like ships without helms. One moment you're beatin' as hard as you can to wind'ard; the next you fall off all of a sudden and scud away right before the breeze; or, whew! round you come into the wind's eye, an' lay to as if you'd bin caught in the heaviest gale that ever blow'd since Admiral Noah cast anchor on Mount Ararat. Didn't you say, not three weeks gone by, that you'd be my wife? and now you ask me, as cool as an iceberg, what I would have! Why, Nelly, I would have our wedding-day fixed, our cottage looked after, our boat and nets bought; in fact, our home and business set a-goin'. And why not at once, Nelly? Surely you have not repented—"

"No, Bill Bows," said Nelly, blushing, and laying her hand on the arm of her companion, "I have not repented, and never will repent, of having accepted the best man that ever came to Fairway; but—"

The girl paused and looked down.

"There you go," cried the sailor: "the old story. I knew you would come to that 'but,' and that you'd stick there. Why don't you go on? If I thought that you wanted to wait a year or two, I could easily find work in these times; for Admiral Nelson is glad to get men to follow him to the wars, an' Tom Riggles and I have been talkin' about goin' off together."

"Don't speak of *that*, Bill," said the girl earnestly. "I dread the thought of you going to the wars; but—but—the truth is, I cannot make up my mind to quit my mother."

"You don't need to quit her," said Bill; "bring her with you. I'll be glad to have her at my fireside, for your sake, Nell."

“But she won’t leave the old house.”

“H’m! well, that difficulty may be got over by my comin’ to the old house, since the old ’ooman won’t come to the noo one. I can rent it from her, and buy up the furniture as it stands; so that there will be no occasion for her to move out of her chair.—Why, what’s the objection to that plan?” he added, on observing that Nelly shook her head.

“She would never consent to sell the things,—not even to you, Bill; and she has been so long the head of the house that I don’t think she would like to—to—”

“To play second fiddle,” put in the sailor. “Very good, but I won’t ask to play first fiddle. In fact, she may have first, second, and third, and double bass and trombone, all to herself as far as I am concerned. Come, Nelly, don’t let us have any more ‘buts’; just name the day, and I’ll bear down on the parson this very afternoon.”

Leaving them to continue the discussion of this interesting point, we will turn into the cottage and visit the old woman who stood so much in the way of our hero’s wishes.

Mrs Blyth was one of those unfortunates who, although not very old, have been, by ill-health, reduced to the appearance of extreme old age. Nevertheless, she had been blessed with that Christian spirit of calm, gentle resignation, which is frequently seen in aged invalids, enabling them to bear up cheerfully under heavy griefs and sufferings. She was very little, very thin, very lame, very old-looking (ninety at least, in appearance), very tremulous, very subdued, and *very* sweet. Even that termagant gossip, Mrs Hard-soul, who dwelt alone in a tumble-down hut near the quay, was heard upon one occasion to speak of her as “dear old Mrs Blyth.”

Beside Mrs Blyth, on a stool, engaged in peeling potatoes, sat a young woman who was in all respects her opposite. Bessy Blunt was tall, broad, muscular, plain-looking, masculine, and remarkably unsubdued. She was a sort of maid-of-all-work and companion to the old woman. Mrs Blyth lived in the hope of subduing her attendant—who was also her niece—by means of kindness.

“Who came into the garden just now?” asked Mrs Blyth in a meek voice.

“Who would it be but William Bowls? sure he comes twice every day, sometimes oftener,” replied Bessy; “but what’s the use? nothing comes of it.”

“Something *may* come of it, Bessy,” said Mrs Blyth, “if William settles down steadily to work, but I am anxious about him, for he seems to me hasty in temper. Surely, Bessy, you would not like to see our Nell married to an angry man?”

“I don’t know about that,” replied the girl testily, as she cut a potato in two halves with unnecessary violence; “all I know is that I would like to see her married to Bill Bowls. He’s an able, handsome man. Indeed, I would gladly marry him myself if he asked me!”

Mrs Blyth smiled a little at this. Bessy frowned at a potato and said “Humph!” sternly.

Now it happened just at that moment that the press-gang before referred to arrived in front of the cottage. Bessy chanced to look through the window, and saw them pass. Instantly she ran to the back door and screamed “Press-gang,” as a warning to Bill to get out of the way and hide himself as quickly as possible, then, hastening back, she seized one of old Mrs Blyth’s crutches, ran to the front door, and slammed it to, just as the leader of the gang came forward.

Meanwhile William Bowls, knowing that if he did not make his escape, his hopes of being married speedily would be blasted, turned to leap over the garden wall, but the leader of the press-gang had taken care to guard against such a contingency by sending a detachment round to the rear.

“It’s all up with me!” cried Bill, with a look of chagrin, on observing the men.

“Come, hide in the kitchen; quick! I will show you where,” cried Nelly, seizing his hand and leading him into the house, the back door of which she locked and barred.

“There, get in,” cried the girl, opening a low door in the wall, which revealed the coal-hole of the establishment.

Bill’s brow flushed. He drew back with a proud stern look and hesitated.

“Oh, do! for *my* sake,” implored Nell.

A thundering rap on the front door resounded through the cottage; the sailor put his pride in his pocket, stooped low and darted in. Nelly shut the door, and leaned a baking-board against it.

“Let us in!” said a deep voice outside.

“Never!” replied Bessy, stamping her foot.

“You had better, dear,” replied the voice, in a conciliatory tone; “we won’t do you any harm.”

“Go along with you—brutes!” said the girl.

“We’ll have to force the door if you don’t open it, my dear.”

“You’d better not!” cried Bessy through the keyhole.

At the same time she applied her eye to that orifice, and instantly started back, for she saw the leader of the gang retire a few paces preparatory to making a rush. There was short time for action, nevertheless Bessy was quick enough to fling down a large stool in front of the door and place herself in an attitude of defence. Next moment the door flew open with a crash, and a sailor sprang in, cutlass in hand. As a matter of course he tripped over the stool, and fell prostrate at Bessy’s feet, and the man who followed received such a well-delivered blow from the crutch that he fell on the top of his comrade. While the heroine was in the act of receiving the third she felt both her ankles seized by the man who had fallen first. A piercing yell followed. In attempting to free herself she staggered back and fell, the crutch was wrenched from her grasp, and the whole gang poured over her into the kitchen, where they were met by their comrades, who had just burst in the back door.

“Search close,” cried one of these; “there’s a big fellow in the house; we saw him run into it.”

“You may save yourselves the trouble; there’s no man in this house,” cried Bessy, who had risen and followed her conquerors, and who now stood, with dishevelled locks, flushed countenance, and gleaming eyes, vowing summary vengeance on the first man she caught off his guard!

As the men believed her, they took care to keep well on their guard while engaged in the search. Poor old Mrs Blyth looked absolutely horror-stricken at this invasion of her cottage, and Nelly stood beside her, pale as marble and trembling with anxiety.

Every hole and corner of the house was searched without success; the floors were examined for trap-doors, and even the ceilings were carefully looked over, but there was no sign of any secret door, and the careless manner in which the bake-board had been leaned against the wall, as well as its small size, prevented suspicion being awakened in that direction. This being the case, the leader of the gang called two of his men aside and engaged in a whispered conversation.

“It’s quite certain that he is here,” said one, “but where they have stowed him is the puzzle.”

“Well, it is indeed a puzzle,” replied the leader, “but I’ve thought of a plan. He may be the father, or brother, or cousin of the household, d’ye see, and it strikes me if we were to pretend to insult the women, that would draw him out!”

“But I don’t half like that notion,” said one of the men.

“Why not?” asked the other, who wore a huge pair of whiskers, “it’s only pretence, you know. Come, I’ll try it.”

Saying this he went towards old Mrs Blyth and whispered to Nelly—“Don’t be frightened, my ducky, we’re only a-goin’ to try a dodge, d’ye see. Stand by, we won’t do you no harm.”

The man winked solemnly several times with the view of reassuring Nelly, and then raising his voice to a loud pitch exclaimed—

“Come now, old ’ooman, it’s quite plain that there’s a feller in this here house, an’ as we can’t find him nowheres, we’ve come to the conclusion he must be under your big chair. In coorse we must ask you to git up, an’ as ye don’t seem to be able to do that very well, we’ll have to lift you. So here goes.”

The man seized the old woman’s chair and shuffled with his feet as though he were about to lift it. Nelly screamed. Bessy uttered a howl of indignation, and rushed upon the foe with teeth and nails ready, but being arrested by a powerful man in the rear, she vented her wrath in a hideous yell.

The success of the scheme was great—much greater, indeed, than had been anticipated. The bake-board fell flat down, the door of the coal-hole burst open, and our hero, springing out, planted a blow on the nose of the big-whiskered man that laid him flat on the floor. Another blow overturned the man who restrained Bessy, and a third was about to be delivered when a general rush was made, and Bill Bowls, being overpowered by numbers, was finally secured.

“Now, my fine fellow,” said the leader of the gang, “you may as well go with us quietly, for ye see resistance is useless, an’ it only frightens the old woman.”

This latter part of the remark had more effect on the unfortunate Bill than the former. He at once resigned himself into the hands of his captors. As he was about to be led away, he turned towards Mrs Blyth, intending to speak, but the poor old woman had fainted, and Nelly’s fears for her lover were lost for the moment in her anxiety about her mother. It was not until the party had left the room that the poor girl became fully aware of what was going on.

Uttering a loud cry she rushed towards the outer door. Bill heard the cry, and, exerting himself to the utmost, almost succeeded in overturning the five men who held him.

“Make your mind easy,” said one of them; “no harm will come to the women. We ain’t housebreakers or thieves. All fair an’ above board we are—true-blue British tars, as would rather swing at the yard-arm than hurt the feelin’s of a woman, pretty or ugly, young or old. It’s all in the way of dooty, d’ye see? The King’s orders, young man so belay heavin’ about like that, else we’ll heave ye on your beam-ends, lash you hand and futt to a handspike, and carry you aboard like a dead pig.”

“Hold on!” cried the man with the big whiskers, who, after having been knocked down, had become emphatically the man with the big nose, “I’ll go back an’ comfort them a bit: don’t you take on so. *I* know all about it—see through it like a double patent hextromogriphal spy-glass. Only goin’ on a short cruise, d’ye see? Come back soon with lots o’ prize-money; get spliced right off, buy a noo gown with big flowers all over it for the old mother, pension off the stout gal wi’ the crutch—all straight; that’s the thing ain’t it?”

“Don’t, don’t,” entreated Bill earnestly; “don’t go for to—to—”

“No fear, young man,” replied the sailor, seeing that Bill hesitated; “Ben Bolter ain’t the man to do anything that would bring discredit on His Majesty’s service, and I bear you no grudge for this,” he added, pointing to his swelled nose; “it was given in a good cause, and received in the reg’lar way o’ business.”

Saying this Ben Bolter ran back to the cottage, where he tried to comfort the women to the best of his power. How he accomplished his mission does not remain on record, but it is certain that he rejoined his party, in little more than five minutes, with sundry new marks of violence on his huge honest face, and he was afterwards heard to remark that some creatures of the tiger species must have been born women by mistake, and that stout young females who had a tendency to use crutches, had better be pensioned off—or, “drownded if possible.”

Thus was William Bowls impressed into the Royal Navy. On hearing that his old shipmate had been caught, Tom Riggles at once volunteered into the service, and they were both sent on board a man-of-war, and carried off to fight the battles of their country.

Chapter Three.

Bill is Initiated into the Duties of his new Station

At the time of which we write, England's battles and troubles were crowding pretty thick upon one another. About this period, Republican France, besides subduing and robbing Switzerland, Italy, Sardinia, and other States, was busily engaged in making preparation for the invasion of England,—Napoleon Bonaparte being in readiness to take command of what was styled the “army of England.” Of course great preparations had to be made in this country to meet the invading foe. The British Lion was awakened, and although not easily alarmed or stirred up, he uttered a few deep-toned growls, which showed pretty clearly what the Frenchmen might expect if they should venture to cross the Channel. From John o' Groats to the Land's End the people rose in arms, and in the course of a few weeks 150,000 volunteers were embodied and their training begun.

Not satisfied with threatening invasion, the Directory of France sought by every means to corrupt the Irish. They sent emissaries into the land, and succeeded so well that in May 1798 the rebellion broke out. Troops, supplies, and munitions of war were poured into Ireland by France; but the troops were conquered and the rebellion crushed.

Finding at length that the invasion of England could not be carried out, this pet projection was abandoned, and Napoleon advised the Directory to endeavour to cripple her resources in the East. For the accomplishment of this purpose, he recommended the establishment on the banks of the Nile of a French colony, which, besides opening a channel for French commerce with Africa, Arabia, and Syria, might form a grand military depôt, whence an army of 60,000 men could be pushed forward to the Indus, rouse the Mahrattas to a revolt, and excite against the British the whole population of those vast countries.

To an expedition on so grand a scale the Directory objected at first, but the master-spirit who advised them was beginning to feel and exert that power which ultimately carried him to the throne of the Empire. He overcame their objections, and the expedition to Egypt was agreed to.

With characteristic energy and promptitude Napoleon began to carry out his plans, and Great Britain, seeing the storm that was brewing, commenced with equal energy to thwart him. Accordingly, the great Sir Horatio Nelson, at that time rear-admiral, was employed with a squadron to watch the movements and preparations of the French in the Mediterranean.

Such was the state of matters when our hero, Bill Bows, was conveyed on board the *Waterwitch*, a seventy-four gun frigate, and set to work at once to learn his duty.

Bill was a sensible fellow. He knew that escape from the service, except in a dishonourable manner, was impossible, so he made up his mind to do his duty like a man, and return home at the end of the war (which he hoped would be a short one), and marry Nelly Blyth. Poor fellow, he little imagined what he had to go through before—but hold, we must not anticipate the story.

Well, it so happened that Bill was placed in the same mess with the man whose nose he had treated so unceremoniously on the day of his capture. He was annoyed at this, but the first time he chanced to be alone with him, he changed his mind, and the two became fast friends. It happened thus:—

They were standing on the weather-side of the fore-castle in the evening, looking over the side at the setting sun.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.