JAMES BARNES

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE PROJECT

Mr. James Nesbit, merchant of Philadelphia, stood leaning against the long, polished desk at the farther end of which two clerks were hard at work copying entries into a ponderous ledger. On Mr. Nesbit's face there was a look of preoccupation. He drew a deep breath, rapped nervously with his finger on the desk, and, reaching behind his ear, under the folds of his heavy white wig, threw down a large quill pen. Then, taking a big silver snuff-box out of his pocket, he helped himself neatly to a pinch of snuff. Having done this he waited anxiously, as if the expected sneeze might jar his mind into better working order. It seemed to answer, for, after a preliminary rumbling gasp and an explosion, he blew his nose violently, and turning addressed one of the

clerks.

"If Mr. Conyngham comes during the next few minutes, tell him I shall be at 'The Old Clock' coffee-house", he said.

With that he took down a great cloak from one of the wooden pegs that lined the wall and stepped to the door. It was raining torrents, and the gutters were running full. With an agility that was surprising in so heavy a man and one of his years, he gathered the cloak about him, and picking up his heels ran swiftly around the corner. Just as he turned he collided with another man much younger and slightly smaller, who was hurrying in the opposite direction. They grasped each other in order to keep their feet, and at once burst into laughter.

"Well met, indeed, David!" cried Mr. Nesbit, even before he had uttered a word of apology, "but you've well-nigh knocked the breath out of me."

"And me also," responded the smaller man. "You charged around the corner like a squadron of horse. Why such a hurry, sir?"

"A short explanation," was the answer, "'tis past my meal hour, and I had waited for you till I could stand it no longer. Years ago, methinks, I must have swallowed a wolf, and at feeding hours he's wont to grow rapacious and must be satisfied. Come, here we are at 'The Old Clock.' In with us out of the rain and we'll satisfy the ravenous one."

As he was speaking Mr. Nesbit almost pushed his friend ahead of him through a doorway and entered the grill-room of the

tavern. A mingled odor of roast beef, ale, and tobacco smoke saluted their nostrils, and the proprietor, his wide waistcoat covered by a gleaming new apron, greeted them cheerfully.

"A wet day, gentlemen," he observed, "but good weather for the farmers."

"And for ducks and geese and all such," interjected Mr. Nesbit, "but I would have you observe, Mr. Turner, that I am a dry-goods merchant and wish the bad weather would confine itself to the country."

As he spoke he took off his heavy cloak with one hand, and relieved his friend of one almost as large, from which the water was dripping on to the sanded floor. Giving instructions to the landlord that they should both be hung by the fire where they might dry, he turned and glanced about the room, nodding to two or three men who sat at a table in the corner.

"No one but our friends here to-day," he remarked; "we won't join them, however. Let us sit apart, for there is much I would discuss with thee."

"And there is much I have to say also," returned the other, "that is not for the general ear. Is the post in?"

"Late on account of the roads, I take it," was the response, "but there will be important news from Boston and New York, I warrant you. But now to feed the wolf! A most inconvenient beast at times, but most easily placated. Ah! there's a cut of beef for you, and now some of your best mulled ale, Mr. Turner, and thanks to you."

As if he saw that it was useless to begin any conversation until Mr. Nesbit's personal menagerie was quieted, the smaller man said nothing, and for some minutes the two ate in silence. At last, with a sigh of pleasurable relief, James Nesbit pushed himself back from the table and set down the empty tankard with a bang.

"Your news first," he said. "What is it, Friend Conyngham?"

"I have been successful," was the rejoinder. "She's not very large, but is prepossessing to look at, and they say a good one in smooth water. Tho' only a coaster brig we think she'll serve our purpose, and as no time was to be lost I have concluded the bargain. She is ours in joint ownership."

"You have been deft, David," said Mr. Nesbit, "but there is a matter of more importance, in view of the shortness of the time. Have you found the man?"

"The very one; at least believe me that I am influenced but by my best judgment. You've heard me speak of him often. My kinsman, Gustavus. He is just in yesterday from a voyage to the West Indies, with a load of fruit, rum, and molasses."

"The same young seaman who married Mistress Anne Hockley some time ago?"

"The same. The captain of the Molly."

"I would he had brought in a cargo of powder and cannon-balls. Aye, or saltpeter and cloth and medicines. We'll need them, for mark my words – "

"Hush," interposed Mr. Conyngham suddenly. "Your old enemy, that tory, Lester, and Flackman the lawyer, have just

entered. They are a-prowl for news, I take it."

Mr. Nesbit lowered his voice.

"The time will come when we can talk loudly anywhere," he said. "You may call me a 'hothead,' but after what has been happening up Boston way there is no drawing back. When shall we see Captain Conyngham?" he asked, "for the longer we put the matter off the greater the risk will be."

"This very afternoon. He informed me there were some pressing matters to be attended to, and that he would repair to your office. I have given him but few particulars, but he is eager for the undertaking. He knows of the vessel, too, and pronounces her fit for it."

As he spoke the younger man turned and looked out of the window, against which the wind was driving the large drops of rain.

"Egad, sir!" he exclaimed. "As I am living, who comes around the corner but the very man himself! I will stop him at the door and fetch him in."

As he spoke Mr. Conyngham hurriedly rose and, opening the door, gave a seaman's hail, followed by a wave of the hand.

The inrush of fresh air caused all the men seated about the room to turn suddenly, and they were just in time to see the entrance of a short but well-knit figure dressed in a sailor's greatcoat, from under which appeared a pair of heavy sea boots. He threw a shower of water from his sleeves and his hat as he grasped his cousin's hand.

"Homeward bound!" he cried. "But any port out of the storm."

"Well, then, come in and cast anchor beside the table here. Off with your wet things and be comfortable. You know our friend, Mr. Nesbit."

"I knew your father and all your family," spoke the elder man who had been addressed, rather ponderously.

"By the powers, you know half the County of Donegal, then, and more than I do," laughed the sailor, with a touch of a rich rolling brogue. "But years ago," he added, "I met you, sir, when I was with Captain Henderson, who was in the Antigua trade. I was but a slip of a lad then, and no doubt you have forgotten me."

"No," responded Mr. Nesbit, "I have a good memory, and, what is more to the point, I remember what Captain Henderson said of you."

"It was his only fault," returned the sailor, shaking his head, "the loose tongue he had! But perhaps he spoke in the heat of anger, and might think better of it."

"Oh, it was nothing to be ashamed of," replied Mr. Nesbit, laughing in his turn.

"Oh, an amiable enough man at times; perhaps I wronged him then. He was always a great palaverer."

The young captain had seated himself by this time, and after the last speech he turned and looked about the room. His glance fell for a moment upon the two men, Lester and Flackman, who had been referred to by Mr. Nesbit in his conversation a few minutes previously. He half nodded toward them, and the action

called his cousin's attention.

"So, Captain Gustavus, you know our friend Lester," said David quickly.

"Just well enough to keep an eye on him," was the rejoinder. "I saw him talking with the mate of that old Dutch Indiaman that lies astern of the Charming Peggy. I judged from the way he was talking that she was the subject of conversation, so I hove to and asked them a few silent questions."

"What did you do that for?" asked David Conyngham. "Silent questions!"

"Sure, to find out how little they know," answered the captain roguishly. "It is as good to know how little a man knows as how much, sometimes."

"And what was that little?" asked Mr. Nesbit.

"That he knows who bought her in Baltimore," was the reply.

"Did he say so?"

"Not in words spoken to me. For he would have denied that he had any interest in the matter. But by means of a little trick that I learned when a schoolboy, and that I have cultivated since for my amusement. It served me a good turn more than once. I got it from an Irish schoolmaster in Letterkenny. It was the one thing he taught me without knowing how he did it. Whisht," went on the captain, "listen, and I'll prove it to ye. There's a man sitting with his back to you, but facing me. Can you hear what he says?"

"He's at the other end of the room," responded Mr. Nesbit. "No man could hear what he says at that distance."

"But I can *see* what he says," answered Conyngham, "and he has just uttered a speech that would make King George shudder. Being a believer in soft language I will not repeat it. It's all in watching a man's lips. Sure this old schoolmaster was deaf as a post, but he could hear what you were thinking of if you only whispered it. Many a good lickin' I got before I was sure of it. But now to business," he added, "if you're going to talk of it this day. For I must confess to you, gentlemen, that I have a wife waiting for me, and while it's pleasant here, I'd like to get under way for home."

"Well, Mr. Conyngham," returned Mr. Nesbit, who was a trifle upset by the young officer's loquaciousness and yet his directness, "we want you to take command of the Charming Peggy. That much your cousin has informed you. You are to pick a crew as quick as possible and to sail for Holland."

"With what cargo?" asked the captain.

"In ballast," was the reply. "It's of no importance what you bring over; it's what you shall bring back."

"And that would be easy guessing, sir. I could write it out blindfolded."

"Perhaps so; but of that more to-morrow, when we will meet in my counting-house. We won't detain you longer."

As Captain Conyngham was slipping on his still wet greatcoat, he leaned forward and spoke softly to the others, who had risen, but were standing by their chairs:

"Our fine gentlemen yonder have put two and two together,"

he said, "as why shouldn't they? And the man with the fat jowls, whom you call 'Lester,' has just made a remark that it is a good thing to remember, for he has just said that he would keep an eye on the Charming Peggy, and mark the time of her sailing. By the same token there are two English men-o'-war just off the capes of the Delaware. I sailed by them in the fog."

"Forewarned is forearmed, Captain Conyngham," returned Mr. Nesbit, "and we'll keep an eye on Mr. Lester."

"If he comes down by my ship let's pray he's a good swimmer," responded the captain, jamming his heavy hat down over his black hair and drawing his queue from under his coat collar. With that he pulled his sea boots well up his legs and went out into the storm.

For a minute Mr. David Conyngham and the senior partner remained silent, and then the latter spoke.

"An odd character," he said suggestively, "this kinsman of yours. Might I say without any offense, that he has a certain amount of assurance."

"Call it self-reliance better," responded David, "it was always so with him as a boy. But mark you this, sir, behind it all he has the courage that is daunted at nothing, and ask any seaman with whom he has sailed if he knows of a better or more resourceful man in emergencies."

"He comes of good stock," rejoined Mr. Nesbit, "eh, David?"

The younger man caught the elder's twinkling eye and bowed.

"We've all been kings in Ireland," he returned, "and to quote

Gustavus, 'surely one king is as good as another.' But the news that you had for me has not been told. What is it?"

"A secret of state, my friend, and one that must be kept as quiet as the grave." He leaned toward Conyngham as he spoke. "Our good Dr. Franklin is going to France to represent the cause of the colonies at the court of the French king, and by the time he does so," he added, "we shall no longer be in the category of 'rebels,' for there are great doings afoot."

"I know, I understand," answered the younger man, his face lighting. "God prosper the new nation!"

"God prosper the new nation," repeated Mr. Nesbit, "and confusion to the enemies of liberty!"

The storm had abated suddenly, and in a few minutes a ray of warm spring sunlight pierced the cloud. Mr. Nesbit and the junior partner rose, and arm in arm went out into the street.

The glances of the tory and Flackman the lawyer followed their exit, and as they disappeared the two men fell to whispering earnestly.

CHAPTER II
THE VOYAGE OF THE CHARMING PEGGY

It was lucky that the water was smooth and that the Charming Peggy was on her best tack, otherwise the frigate that was now dropping fast astern would have overhauled her ere she had been well clear of the capes. The gun that the Englishman had fired had had a ring of disappointment in it, an admonition more of warning than of threat. Captain Conyngham, looking back over the low taffrail, waved his hand as he saw her haul her wind.

"Good-by to you, my petty tyrant," he cried half aloud. "I hope I've seen the last of the likes of you."

The crew, whose expressions had changed during the short chase from anxiety to hope, and from hope to satisfaction, looked up at the little quarter-deck where the captain was pacing to and fro with firm, springing steps. They were a motley lot, this crew, mostly American sailormen from Baltimore, a half-Spaniard from the West Indies, and two strong fellows who had about them the unmistakable marks of man-of-war's-men. In all there were but fifteen, including the cook, a big, curly-haired Virginia negro with a rolling eye and a soft, high-pitched voice.

The young captain had been more than satisfied with the way they had jumped at his orders during the few exciting

moments when it was a moot question whether he would be able to cross the frigate's bows at a range beyond gunshot. He had just managed to do it and no more, but it had proved to his satisfaction that, given a smooth sea and a light wind, the Charming Peggy could outfoot any of her ponderous pursuers. He well knew that the dangerous time would soon come when in English home waters, and that there stratagem, as well as speed, would have to be resorted to if occasion demanded. He could scarcely hope to reach a Dutch or French port without some further adventure, and to tell the truth he was in a measure prepared for a certain form of it. On the forecastle rail were mounted two swivel guns, and amidships a short six-pounder. Not a formidable armament, to be sure, but sufficient, if at close range, with the element of surprise added, to account for any small merchant vessel that the Peggy might fall in with.

Still, in his sailing orders, nothing had been said about the taking of prizes. He had merely been ordered to get safely in to some Dutch port and bring out as soon as possible a miscellaneous cargo of such materials and supplies as merchants could dispose of most readily to the fighting branch of the revolted colonies.

All was plain sailing, with pleasant breezes, until at the end of the twenty-third day after leaving the capes. Then a storm sprang up with high winds, and the tumbling, rolling seas that mark the edge of the Bay of Biscay, and there the Charming Peggy proved to be a disappointment. Safe enough she was, but

she butted and jumped and turned like a tub in a mill-race. She acted like a bewitched and bewildered creature, and in order to prevent having to run for it, Captain Conyngham had recourse to an expedient often used in vessels of light tonnage. He rigged out a sea-anchor, and for three days the observations showed that the Peggy's position was about stationary. On the fourth day the weather cleared a bit, the wind shifted, and twenty-four hours' good sailing to the northward brought her in sight of the English coast. The wind holding fair, she entered King George's private channel with all light canvas flying, and everything seeming to promise well for the future. Numerous sail had been sighted on either hand, but Captain Conyngham kept well to the eastward, close in to the low-lying French coast. Clumsy fishing craft and trading vessels had been passed near at hand, but not a sign of a man-of-war, or anything to give the slightest concern as to the safety of the Charming Peggy. But late in the afternoon of the second day, after the clearing away of the storm, there appeared, bowling along, and holding such a course as would bring her soon within hailing distance, a jaunty single-masted vessel that needed no second glance to determine her class and quality.

Captain Conyngham knew her to be one of the fast king's cutters long before he had looked at her through the glass, but he held his own course as if unconcerned, and now the expected resort to strategy was necessary. At his orders the Dutch flag had been shown, and the cutter, although coming nearer and nearer, showed apparently no signs of suspicion. The watch on deck

lolled over the rail, glancing from the approaching vessel to their young skipper, who like themselves was leaning over the side puffing a cloud of smoke from a long clay pipe. Occasionally, however, he would give an order to the helmsman that was obeyed, and it was seen that almost imperceptibly the brig was edging up nearer the wind, and that the approaching cutter, that was sailing close hauled also, would pass astern of her.

The captain turned for an instant, from measuring the lessening distance between the two vessels, to see how the crew were taking it, for any untoward action now might attract the other's attention. Captain Conyngham could not make up his mind at first as to whether she intended hailing him or not, and still in doubt, he spoke to the first mate, a lean New Englander, who sat on the edge of the cabin transom, smilingly addressing him.

"Mr. Jarvis, I wonder which of us speaks the best Dutch?" he half queried. "If that fellow yonder intends to hail us, we've got to get an answer ready. I'm pretty good on Spanish, and I can 'parlez-vous' after a fashion, but Dutch has been Dutch to me. We should have flown the Spanish flag, but it's too late now, bad luck to it."

"Wa-al," the Yankee answered, "I'm thinkin' if we just squeeze her the least bit more she'll be at jus' such a distance that y'u couldn't make nothin' out through a speakin'-trumpet, and Dutch is Dutch to most Englishmen anyhow."

By this time the figures on board the approaching cutter

could be plainly seen. On the quarter-deck there were two officers standing together, while forward the crew lay bunched together, sheltering, behind the low bulwarks, from the spray that dashed over her bows. Again Captain Conyngham looked at his own crew standing in the waist. Talking together were the two sailormen who had had the mark upon them of the royal service. One, Captain Conyngham had suspected from the very first of being a deserter from one of the English ships that had touched at an American port. His name – Higgins – also might have gone to strengthen his suspicion, and he had a little Devonshire twist in his speech. The other, a shorter man, with light blue eyes, was a compatriot of the young captain; he had a broad stretch of upper lip, and the strong brogue of the west coast.

Conyngham's eye fell upon these two as they stood there and suddenly he started. They were whispering almost beneath their breath. Strange to say the supposed deserter showed no signs of the fear that the occasion might have demanded; yet he was a trifle nervous, for his fingers hitched at the lanyard of his clasp-knife.

"Higgins," cried Captain Conyngham suddenly, "below with you and fetch me one of the broadaxes from the carpenter's chest. And stay," he said; "bring me up a dozen nails, two of each kind. Sort them out carefully and make no mistake about it."

The man hesitated.

"Below with you there," the captain repeated, half fiercely, "and no questions."

Reluctantly the tall sailor went down the forward hatchway.

"McCarthy," called Captain Conyngham again, "go to my cabin and tell the boy to send me up my trumpet, and stay below until I send for you."

The other men had listened to these orders in some astonishment. Even the first mate had cast an inquiring glance at the captain, but had said nothing.

In a few minutes the boy appeared with the speaking-trumpet. Captain Conyngham took it and held it out of sight beneath his coat.

The position of the English cutter was now a little abaft the beam of the Charming Peggy, but she was dropping farther and farther astern with every foot of sailing.

Suddenly across the water there was a hail. "Heave to, I want to speak to you," came plainly and distinctly.

The captain, after his sudden orders to the sailors, had resumed smoking. Now he took the long pipe from his mouth and leaning forward placed his hand behind his ear as if he had not understood.

Again the hail was repeated. This time the captain waved his hand denoting complete understanding. Then he turned as if he was giving some orders aloud to the crew, but instead he told the steersman to luff a little, and spoke quietly to the first mate:

"Two minutes more and we'll be out of it, Mr. Jarvis," he said; "she will never fire at us."

The cutter still held on, and was by this time well astern.

The officer who had hailed was standing with his companion expectantly leaning against the shrouds.

Conyngham whipped the trumpet from under his coat, as if it had just been handed him, and bellowed something back over the taffrail. Then he waved his hand cheerfully and went on smoking his pipe.

The two men on the English vessel were evidently perplexed. But the Charming Peggy, now having gone back to her course again, and having the weather-gage, was rapidly leaving. At last, as if her suspicion had been satisfied, the cutter wore, let go her sheets, and went off free to the southeast.

The men on the Charming Peggy were all in a broad grin, and Mr. Jarvis was almost hugging himself in sheer delight and relief.

"I thought you spoke no Dutch, sir," he said, laughing. "What was it you said to him?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," was Conyngham's rejoinder, "but I think it had some Irish in it."

He did not appear amused, however, and a moment or two later he stopped suddenly in the pacing that he had taken up again. With a stern look on his face he ordered that the two men he had told to go below should be sent up to him at once.

If the crew had been surprised at what they had just witnessed, they were soon to be more so. The two men appeared and, hat in hand, stood at the mast. Higgins carried in one hand a bundle of iron nails and in the other the ax, one side of which was flat like a hammer.

Captain Conyngham ordered him to step forward, and he handed the nails and ax to Mr. Jarvis, who stood wonderingly by his side.

"Higgins," asked Captain Conyngham sternly, "do you know what I want these for?"

"No, sir."

The man was pale, but over his face there flickered a smile of affected amusement or bravado.

"I'll show you. – McCarthy, step up here."

The two men stood before him.

"Now, Higgins," said Conyngham sternly, "I'll tell you what I wanted the nails and ax for. I wanted to nail the lies that you are going to tell me."

The man began to protest feebly, and the captain stopped him.

"What were you saying just as that cutter came within hailing distance?"

"I was saying nothing, sir."

"Lie number one; you were."

The captain changed one of the nails from one hand into the other.

"You, McCarthy, what did you say to Higgins?"

"I said nothing, sir."

"Lie number two."

The captain looked from one to the other with his piercing eyes, and then, almost without a movement of preparation, his bare fists shot out to left and right, and the men dropped where

they stood like knackered beeves.

It had all come so suddenly that the crew, at least those who had been watching, were held spellbound in astonishment. Even Mr. Jarvis looked frightened, and gazed at his superior officer, wondering if he had lost his senses.

"Here, pick these men up, some of you, and put them on their feet," ordered Conyngham sternly.

Half dazed, the two men were propped against the railing.

"What are you doing aboard this vessel?"

"Sailing as honest seamen," responded the Englishman, who had recovered his equilibrium in a measure, and in whose eyes glared a fierce light of mad hatred, as he returned Conyngham's steadfast look.

"Lie number three. But we won't go on. I'll tell you what you said. When you saw that we were outpointing that cutter, you said that when she was near enough to hail, you would take your knife and cut away the sheets, and that McCarthy here would let go the jib-halyards, and that you would then – " he paused suddenly. "Open your shirt," he ordered.

The men's faces were white and terrified. Higgins fumbled weakly at his breast and then, all at once, collapsed forward on the deck. He had fainted dead away.

Acting on Conyngham's orders, Mr. Jarvis bent over the prostrate man and drew forth and displayed, to the astonished eyes of all, a small British Union Jack.

The crew fell to murmuring. Captain Conyngham was all

smiles again. He waited until Higgins had been revived by a dash of cold water. Then he spoke to the two frightened and now trembling men.

"Your conduct shall be reported," he said, "to Messrs. Lester and Flackman, secret agents of the British Crown. They should not employ such joltheads. Now below with these rascals. Put them in irons, Mr. Jarvis."

In charge of the first mate and the boatswain, the two prisoners were marched below. The captain resumed his hurried pacing of the quarter-deck, and the crew suddenly jumped at his order to shorten sail, for the wind had increased and was blowing in unsteady puffs.

During the early hours of the night it blew half a gale, but died away in the early morning hours, and at daybreak the Peggy found herself jumping uneasily in the rough water with her sails flapping idly against the masts. All about her was a thick opaque white haze. One of the Channel mists had suddenly swept down from the north. It was almost impossible to see even the length of the deck.

The lookout forward, who had been peering over the bows, came stumbling aft to where the first mate, whose watch it was, stood by the wheel.

"There's a vessel close off our bow, sir; listen, and you can hear her! She can't be more than a pistol-shot away."

In the stillness there could be heard the slow squeaking and creaking of blocks and yards, and even the faint tapping of the

reef-points against the sails, as she rose and fell to the seas. Clearer and clearer it sounded every minute.

Slowly but surely the two ships were drifting together.

"Jump below and call the captain to the deck," ordered Mr. Jarvis quietly.

It was evident the Charming Peggy was in for further adventures.

CHAPTER III
BOARDED

By the time that Captain Conyngham reached the deck the outlines of the stranger could be seen. She towered huge and indistinct in the white gloom high above the little Peggy, almost threatening to roll her down as she swept broadside on.

"A frigate!" muttered Conyngham below his breath to Mr. Jarvis, as he noticed the double line of ports out of which the black muzzles of the guns stretched menacingly. Just as he spoke the Charming Peggy's bowsprit struck gently in the foreshrouds of the big one, and with hardly a jar they came together. Strange to say there had been no warning shout from either side. But that the larger vessel had perceived the Peggy first was evident, for instantly half a score of men, a few armed with cutlasses, swarmed down the frigate's side and jumped on deck. They were headed by a young officer, who walked quickly aft.

"What vessel is this?" he asked.

There was no use in dissembling then. Plainly the jig was up with a vengeance.

Quietly, with his arms folded, Captain Conyngham gave the name of the Charming Peggy, but added that she was merely a merchant vessel from Philadelphia in ballast proceeding to Holland to be sold.

At this moment a voice from the frigate hailed the deck, and, calling the young officer by name, asked him the name of the clumsy craft that had dared to run afoul so deliberately of one of his Majesty's ships of war.

"A Yankee rebel brig," returned the young officer. "I think we've made a prize, sir; and she's armed, too," he added, noticing for the first time the six-pounder amidships.

The unseen owner of the voice from the frigate's quarter-deck replied again.

"Examine into her papers and if she's all right let her proceed. If not, we'll put a prize crew on her and send her into Portsmouth."

"Aye, aye, sir," was the lieutenant's answer, and then he turned and requested that Captain Conyngham would produce his papers and muster his crew in the waist.

Conyngham politely asked the young officer to follow him down to the cabin. As he opened the chest that contained the charts and papers his mind was working quickly. He knew that it might be easy to claim that the Charming Peggy was the property of loyal British subjects, for there was nothing to prove otherwise. No one but himself and Mr. Jarvis knew what her mission was, and he did not doubt that he could pull the wool over the young officer's eyes, if it were not for the presence of the two plotters now confined in the forward hold. If their presence should be discovered and their story listened to, he doubted if anything he might say could save him from being taken into a British port;

and the prospect before him was exceedingly unpleasant, in view of the fact that in his mind a long war was about to begin. Still, he hoped that the officer's search would not prove a diligent one, and that the presence of Higgins and McCarthy would not be discovered. The officer looked at the papers carefully, and his words after glancing at them cast a gloom upon Captain Conyngham's hopes.

"I shall have to take a look into your hold," he said peremptorily, "and ask a few questions of the crew."

Conyngham smiled.

"You will find something there in the hold about which I intend to tell you," he said, "and we can both be gainers, I am sure, by the fact. I have with me two troublesome rapscallions, who, I think, owe a term of service to his Majesty. Two deserters, I am sure, that I shall be glad to turn over to you, and I can say good riddance to them with pleasure."

It was a bold step he was taking and he knew it, but it was the only way he could forestall any story that the plotters might tell, and there was the one hope that, being acknowledged deserters, the men might be hastened on board the frigate and their yarn disbelieved. He called up through the transom over his head to Mr. Jarvis, and the latter answered him at once.

"Bring the prisoners out of the hold," he said, "and get their belongings together to hand them over," he ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Mr. Jarvis, catching the drift of the captain's orders. "We'll be glad to get them out of the ship, sir."

Just then the Charming Peggy gave a slight lurch and heeled over to port. The lieutenant started as if to make for the companion-ladder. Conyngham's heart gave a bound. He knew at once what it meant; that a breeze had sprung up and that the two vessels had broken apart. He could hear the tramping of feet on the deck above, and then a sudden crash.

Looking out of the little cabin windows he just caught a glimpse of the bow of the frigate shooting astern, for having the larger spread of canvas set, she had first caught the pressure of the wind. Her large jib-boom coming in contact with the Peggy's mizzenmast had been carried away, and there was a great row and cursing going on in her forecastle.

At this moment Captain Conyngham wished he had said nothing of the prisoners, but it was too late. Both he and the English lieutenant hastened on deck.

Although the wind was blowing very fresh the fog and mist were as thick as ever, and the frigate had disappeared. But from astern a voice shouted through a trumpet:

"Aboard the brig. Mr. Holden there!"

The young officer replied to the hail and the voice went on. "You will stand by, and if necessary we'll send a boat on board of you."

"Aye, aye, sir," answered the lieutenant.

Then he turned and looked at the crew, who were standing together in the port gangway.

Captain Conyngham was about to speak to him when a man

stepped forward. He wore irons on his wrists, and yet attempted to make an awkward salute.

"A word, sir," he said. "This is a Yankee privateersman, belonging to Yankee traitors and bound to Holland to carry back powder and supplies. Me and me mate here were put on board of her with orders to inform on her to the first British officer who should come on board of us."

The young lieutenant looked perplexed. Captain Conyngham still smiled.

"A good yarn, Higgins. Sure, you've got the imagination of a ballad-monger, but it won't do, my lad. There's a good rope's-end and worse perhaps waiting for you and your mate, and you may make the best of it."

The English lieutenant, still mystified, looked from the seaman to the captain, and just then McCarthy, who was manacled also, stepped out.

"It's the truth, sir, you've been told," he said. "I come from the Leonidas. Captain Chisholm put twenty of us ashore in New York under orders to work our way into American vessels. He has the list, sir. We were to get forty pounds apiece, and our discharges."

"By the powers, that story will stand proving, my lad," rejoined Captain Conyngham quietly. "And now, Mr. Holden – if I understand that to be your name, sir," he added politely – "we'll start for Portsmouth. The course should be, unless I miss my reckoning, south by west half west."

Before the still mystified lieutenant could say a word, Conyngham began to give hurried orders, and the crew of Americans and Englishmen jumped to obey them.

The two prisoners, protesting loudly and mocked at by their companions, were again sent below, their irons still on their wrists.

Conyngham and the lieutenant stood side by side on the quarter-deck. The Britisher was a very young man, and perhaps inexperienced. At all events, he seemed uncertain now what course of action to take. Conyngham's next words, however, seemed to reassure him, for they evidently spoke his wishes.

"We'll run close to the frigate, Mr. Holden, and you can tell your captain what you've done," said Conyngham quietly. "I'll be glad to look into Portsmouth myself, for I have some friends there, and a cargo of sand won't spoil for a few days' longer voyage."

In a few minutes the fog-blurred form of the frigate could be made out now on the port hand. She was hove to, her foresail rippling and fluttering in the freshening breeze, her mainsail against the mast, and her crew standing by the tacks and sheets.

"Pray the Lord that the fog holds four hours longer," muttered Captain Conyngham to himself.

Mr. Holden hailed the frigate through the trumpet.

"On board the Minerva," he shouted. "We're going into Portsmouth, sir."

"Very good," was the reply, "wait there for us."

"And now, Mr. Holden," spoke Conyngham quietly, "will you take command of the brig, or shall I continue?"

The lieutenant hesitated. Before he could answer Captain Conyngham continued:

"It's a straight run, sir, and with this wind she'd make it with her helm lashed; and now if you'll allow me, I should propose that we'd go below and have some breakfast. There's one thing this little craft can boast, and that's a famous Virginia cook. Mr. Jarvis," he added, "see that the men are fed and send Socrates to me in a few minutes. You'll hold the same course, sir, until we return on deck."

The mate saluted, and Captain Conyngham and his guest went down to the cabin.

Five minutes later the negro cook knocked at the cabin door and was bidden to enter. There at the table sat Captain Conyngham, and in the big chair beside him sat the lieutenant.

The negro's eyes opened in astonishment, for the Englishman was tied fast to the seat, and a gag made of the captain's handkerchief was strapped across his mouth!

Captain Conyngham was breathing as if from some hard exertion. The lieutenant's face and eyes were suffused with angry red.

"Now, Socrates," said Conyngham slowly, "you will cook us the very best breakfast that you can, and serve it here in the cabin in half an hour. But, in the meantime, take a message to Mr. Jarvis on deck, and hand him this quietly. There are ten Britishers

with us and we still number thirteen. Tell the boatswain, without any one seeing you, what you have seen here in the cabin. Attract no suspicion, and try whether you can live up to your name. Now go forward quietly."

He handed a pistol to the negro, who slipped it under his apron and went up on deck.

The English sailors did not seem to be in the least suspicious, and the Americans fell in readily with the apparent position of affairs. But as one after another was called to the galley on some pretext, they soon were cognizant of the captain's plot.

The English sailors had discarded their cutlasses, and were grouped with the others about the mess-kits that had been brought up on deck, when suddenly the captain appeared alone from the cabin. Mr. Jarvis joined him, and both stepped quickly forward toward the forecastle. The men, seeing the two officers approach, arose to their feet. The English sailors glanced suspiciously about them, and a glance was enough to convince them that they were trapped. At the elbow of each man stood one of their whilom hosts. A few of the Americans were armed with pistols, and the negro cook with a big carving-knife stood over the pile of cutlasses that they had left on the deck by the main fife-rail.

"Now, men," said Conyngham quietly, "we want no cutting, slashing, or shooting, and you're our prisoners. But don't be afraid," he added, as he saw a look of fear come into the Englishmen's eyes. "We are no pirates. You'll get to Portsmouth

all right, where you can join your ship. You'll have a good joke to tell them of the Yankee-Irish trick that was played on you. Take the prisoners below, Mr. Corkin," he continued, addressing the boatswain. "Put them in the hold and mount a guard over them. – And now, Socrates," he added, turning to the grinning cook, "we'll have our breakfast in the cabin."

The English lieutenant, released from his bonds, sat at first in sulky silence and would not even touch a bit of the savory rasher that Socrates placed before him. When he went on deck later at Captain Conyngham's invitation he looked off to the eastward. The Minerva, almost hull down, was holding a course toward the French coast. At the masthead of the Charming Peggy fluttered the English flag, and in the distance to the westward, plain above the horizon, rose the English shores.

"We'll go in a little closer, Mr. Holden," said Captain Conyngham, "and then we'll part company, sir."

He turned to the first mate.

"Mr. Jarvis," he went on, "prepare to lower the cutter; put in a breaker of water, two bags of biscuit, and a bottle of port."

After half an hour's more sailing the brig was hove to and the crew, with Higgins and McCarthy now freed from their irons, pushed out from the brig's side. In the stern sheets sat the lieutenant disconsolately.

He turned to watch the brig as she came about and headed off shore. At that moment down came the English flag and the Spanish took its place. And it was just at this minute that Captain

Conyngham, looking aloft, spoke to his first mate.

"We'll have a flag of our own soon," he said, "and avast with this masquerading, say I."

The crew, as if they had heard his words, suddenly burst into a spontaneous cheer. Their voices, carried by the wind, reached the Englishmen slowly pulling in for the distant headlands.

CHAPTER IV
IN HOLLAND AND FRANCE

For two months now Captain Conyngham and Jonathan Nesbit, a nephew of Mr. James Nesbit, of Philadelphia, had been in Holland purchasing supplies and outfitting the Peggy, after her safe arrival, for her return voyage to America. They found, however, that the difficulties were greater than they had imagined. Although the cargo had been placed on board, at least the greater part of it, so closely were the Dutch ports watched, and those of France also, that it was almost impossible for any American vessel to set sail for home without word being sent to the English cruisers hovering on the coast of the time for sailing, and many prizes had they taken within a few miles of the harbor mouth. The towns and seaports were full of spies. Both France and Holland were then at peace with England, and English vessels were leaving and entering almost every day, so the naval authorities were well informed of doings elsewhere. Another difficulty also had presented itself in that the stores which had been placed on board the Charming Peggy were evidently munitions of war, and the Dutch Government had been complained to by the English consul, and therefore the little brig was under a strict surveillance. If she had been a faster sailer Captain Conyngham would have taken advantage, on two

or three occasions, of the thick and stormy weather that had prevailed. Once he had slipped his cable, but an English armed sloop near him had done the same and had followed him almost to the open water, where, seeing it was impossible to escape, Conyngham had turned and gone back to his anchorage.

So strong now were the remonstrances of the English representative, that the Dutch custom officials confiscated the Peggy, and she was brought into court. To save themselves a total loss, her cargo was resold at a great discount by Nesbit and Conyngham, and the Peggy herself was disposed of to a Dutch shipping house.

And now Captain Conyngham found himself stranded, like many another American shipmaster, on the shores of a foreign country. His active spirit chafed at the enforced idleness, but week after week passed, and he saw no chance of getting away. But great things had happened in America since his departure, and great things were soon to happen in Europe.

The Declaration of Independence had been signed and heralded to the world. A small fleet had been organized, and it was rumored that vessels of war were building in the home ports to go out and fight the English on the high seas. Stronger and stronger grew the ambition in Conyngham's heart to get into active service. He grew almost despondent, however, as the time dragged on.

It was difficult even to obtain news, and the uncertainty of what was happening at home made his position more galling.

At last one day the information was brought by post from Paris to The Hague that two American vessels of war – the Reprisal, commanded by a Captain Wickes, and a smaller vessel, the Lexington – had arrived in France; but, better news than all that, Dr. Benjamin Franklin had reached the capital itself armed with credentials from the American Congress to act as Minister Plenipotentiary and Extraordinary to the French court.

For a long time a plan had been in Captain Conyngham's mind, the feasibility of which, granting that certain obstacles were removed, tempted him strongly. There were enough American sailormen, of good fighting stock, hanging idly about French and Dutch ports of entry, to man a small squadron. Why was it not possible to fit out one vessel at least and sail into the highway of British commerce? The risk would be great, the rewards would be tremendous, and the advantages to the American cause, if the project was successful, past reckoning. All it required was money and a starting place. It would be necessary, no doubt, from the very first to arrange matters with the immediate authorities in order to have them wink at the proceeding, and to do this, back of the whole idea, there must lurk that important word, authority.

Any ship's captain who sailed on his own account and made prizes in the English Channel, would get no mercy if he once fell into the hands of the enemy. But even without the authority Captain Conyngham was eager to take the risk, if a vessel could be procured and he could find others to join him.

Shortly after the news reached him at The Hague of Franklin's arrival, he left Holland and sailed as passenger in a Dutch coaster to Dunkirk, and there, the very night of his arrival, he met with a man who was to have a great influence in his further doings.

Messrs. Hodge, Allan, and Ross were three Americans, part factors, part merchants, who were in France at the time of the breaking out of war between America and the mother country.

In the earlier months before the English had begun their very strict watching of the foreign ports, they had managed to send out some small and miscellaneous cargoes of supplies. Latterly, however, they had been unsuccessful, but with the arrival of Franklin and the appointment as commissioners of Mr. Arthur Lee and Mr. Silas Deane, the latter a New England merchant well known to them, a better prospect seemed to dawn.

The Reprisal had brought in with her three English vessels, all merchantmen, the first prizes to be brought into the ports of a foreign country. The English ambassador, Lord Stormont, had raised a dreadful row at the French court over this proceeding, and it was rumored that the American vessels and their prizes would be forced to quit the French harbors.

It was just at this time that Conyngham landed at Dunkirk, having come down by sea from Holland in a Dutch packet. He had hardly set foot on French shore when he met a Mr. Thomas Ross, whom he had known as a supercargo on one of his earlier voyages into the Mediterranean. It was years since they had seen one another, but Mr. Ross remembered him at once.

"Well, indeed, Conyngham, this is a surprise!" he cried, shaking hands, after the young captain had accosted him. "And what are you doing here?"

"Fretting my head off," was the reply. "Sure, it is a piece of ill fortune for a man like myself to be idle when there is so much that he would like to do. But before we talk of our own private grievances or affairs, tell me of the news. What has Dr. Franklin accomplished, and what prospects are there that France will do anything for us?"

"We're all in the fog, as you sailors would say," returned Mr. Ross. "But there are some prospects. The army at home has done as well as can be expected, although the British have possession yet of many places, including New York. But come," he added, "you must join me to-night at supper. We're expecting our friend Hodge down from Paris, and my brother and Mr. Allan. They can tell you much of importance. Mr. Hodge was to see Dr. Franklin, and Mr. Deane was to speak for all of us. There will be work here and plenty for good men, if I'm not out in my reckoning. The French as a nation have no love for England, nor has the king, if rumor speaks rightly, and a few big successes on our part may sway the ministry into action, for mark me, my friend, the common people are seldom wrong, and their voice is the heart-beat of the nation."

"By the Powers," rejoined Conyngham, "but you talk like a book. Is it a speech you have been preparing to convince the king?"

Ross laughed.

"I know of one king that was never convinced by speeches," he returned, "and that's the one who sits there across the water."

"Ah, there's one thing that will convince him," returned Conyngham softly and dropping, as he often did, into the very richest of brogues. "Whisht, my lad, and that's cannon-balls and straight shooting."

"You're right, Friend Conyngham," answered Ross. "But there is one thing more that is necessary – supplies and ships – and a truth must be acknowledged: Europe must recognize us as a nation. Three or four big victories on our part would turn the scale. But more of this to-night when we meet. You will find me at my lodgings, there in that little gray house on the corner, the one with the sloping roof, at five o'clock, and we will go to a little tavern that I know of that is kept by a Frenchman we can trust. Don't fail me."

"I will be on hand," returned Conyngham, and the two men parted.

At six o'clock that evening, in the little front room of the Chanticlear Tavern, there were five men seated about the table. The conversation, that had first been of home affairs and the discussion of the latest news from the army – the battles of Trenton and Princeton and Washington's doings – soon turned to matters nearer at hand. Mr. Hodge, a strong-featured, red-faced man of a traditional John Bull appearance, sat between the two Ross brothers. After the waiter had left and they were all alone

he began to talk, and his audience resolved themselves into the most eager listeners.

Conyngham had told his story of the capture of the prize crew, and the recital had at once placed him as one who was worthy of every confidence, and before whom everything could be said openly.

"You'd have laughed," went on Mr. Hodge, continuing the story of his trip to Paris, "to have heard the good doctor describe his arrival in Paris. As yet he has not been received openly at court, but that will all come in due time. Nevertheless, the number of fine names and titles and high personages whom he has met would make quite a bill of lading. You see Lord Stormont, the English ambassador, has his suspicions. He would be a dolt if he hadn't. And the Count de Vergennes, the king's Prime Minister, has his also, but the latter's are the harder to guess. I don't exactly understand the Frenchman," continued Mr. Hodge. "He's a bit too deep for me, and whether or not he is blowing hot and cold to save time, or whether he is really anxious in the end to be of service to us, is more than I can answer for. My own idea of it is that he has but one idea in his head, and that is France, and that he would see our country swamped and ruined if he could further France's interest in the slightest degree. He realizes, no doubt, that in England's troubles and difficulties lie France's opportunities, and that the more she is weakened and distressed, the easier it will be for France when the war comes; for, mark my words, the temper of the French

people can not long be restrained, and sooner or later England and this country will be at each other's throats. But, nevertheless, gentlemen, it is well worth our time to keep a wary eye on M. le Comte de Vergennes, and mind his doings carefully. But I have digressed. I was speaking of Franklin – he told me that Lord Stormont had objected to his coming to Paris at all, and said that 'if this arch-rebel reaches the city I will away home with me, bag and baggage.' 'All right,' says de Vergennes, 'anything to please your excellency! We will despatch a messenger to stop him.' And so a messenger was sent to meet the diligence by which 'Goodman Richard' was coming into Paris, but the messenger took the wrong road and never met the doctor, and the first thing you know Lord Stormont hears that the 'arch-traitor' has arrived. 'Heavens, mercy me!' exclaims de Vergennes, when his lordship calls upon him. 'How could it have happened? I will speak strongly to this fool of a messenger. I will admonish him.' 'But what are you going to do about it?' insists Lord Stormont. 'What can we do?' returns Monsieur le Comte. 'You can not expect us to be uncivil! Surely it is no one but an old gentleman who flies kites and writes almanacs, and we Frenchmen have a reputation for politeness to sustain. We can not ask him to leave without ceremony. It is not our way.' So there he is," continued Mr. Hodge, "hob-nobbing with lords and ladies and what not, and thinking great things in that great head of his; making arrangements with Beaumarchais, who is our friend with good interest now. Oh, such a man!" Mr. Hodge interrupted his

long speech by throwing back his head and laughing heartily.

"Beaumarchais? Beaumarchais? I've heard the name," interrupted Conyngham. "But who is he?"

"The most interesting and fantastic of creatures," replied Mr. Hodge. "A man whose career sounds like the invention of the romancer. His real name is Caron, and he is but the son of a watchmaker, whose timepieces are celebrated. I believe that he himself was brought up to follow his father's trade, but playing the harp attracted him more than adjusting springs and balance-wheels, and he became an instructor and harpist at the court. Being a man of parts besides of harps, and a natural born courtier, he soon made his way and became one of the petted favorites despite his lowly birth. A consummate Jack of all trades. He is the author of plays, two of which I have had the pleasure of seeing – 'The Barber of Seville' and 'The Marriage of Figaro.' The king and the queen trust him implicitly, and he has the ear of most of the noblemen, though some of them dislike him and fear his sharp wits."

"I met him once," interrupted Mr. Allan, "at Nantes – a quietly dressed, smooth-spoken, business-like fellow."

"Then you don't know him at court," laughed Mr. Hodge, "for there he is an exquisite, and can flutter his laces and make his bow with the best of them. He has a hundred sides, and can change color like a chameleon."

"He is a good friend of America and a hater of England," remarked the elder Ross. "If he had his way, Lord Stormont

would be packed off to London, bag and baggage, and there would be no more of this dissembling. He knows the temper of the people, and has his finger on the national pulse."

"I wish that he had his fingers in the national purse," laughed his brother, "for the good doctor is not overburdened with money."

The entrance of the landlord here interrupted the conversation, but as soon as he disappeared Mr. Hodge, who had been doing a great deal of thinking, and had paid little attention to the steaming ragoût, followed him to the door and closed it firmly. Then, coming back to the table, he leaned over his chair and in a low but eager voice addressed the company.

"We're all Americans here," he said, "and Captain Conyngham's recital of his own mission and adventures proves his discretion, and so, gentlemen – a secret." He paused and his eyes swept around the table. "The money will be forthcoming, and if I make no mistake there will be plenty of it."

"Surely the Count de Vergennes, and Necker while he has charge of the purse-strings, will disgorge little," said Mr. Allan dubiously.

"The Prime Minister is a deep one," replied Mr. Hodge. "It pays to keep both eyes on him. He would use America as a cat's-paw, I have no doubt; but nevertheless he sees in the success of our cause the way to stab England deeply. Beaumarchais, with the help of the rest, will prove a match for him."

"But you are digressing," remarked the younger Ross, who

had spoken little up to this time. “How are we to get the arms and munitions?”

“We shall see,” answered Hodge, smiling wisely. “The French Government doesn’t wish to commit itself at present, and as a nation will offer us no direct or open aid, but there is nothing to prevent a private company or corporation from advancing money on its own responsibility, if it assumes the risk, and there lies the secret, to which you gentlemen, I know, will consider yourselves pledged from this minute. Have you heard of Hortalez et Cie. of Paris? It is a new name, and one as yet unknown in commercial circles, but mark me, some day history will record it, and we Americans shall have good cause not to forget it.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.