HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

BY ENGLAND'S AID; OR, THE FREEING OF THE NETHERLANDS (1585-1604)

George Henty

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CHAPTER I
AN EXCURSION

"And we beseech Thee, O Lord, to give help and succour to Thy servants the people of Holland, and to deliver them from the cruelties and persecutions of their wicked oppressors; and grant Thy blessing, we pray Thee, upon the arms of our soldiers now embarking to aid them in their extremity."

These were the words with which the Rev. John Vickars, rector of Hedingham, concluded the family prayers on the morning of December 6th, 1585.

For twenty years the first portion of this prayer had been repeated daily by him, as it had been in tens of thousands of English households; for since the people of the Netherlands first rose against the Spanish yoke the hearts of the Protestants of England had beat warmly in their cause, and they had by turns been moved to admiration at the indomitable courage with which

the Dutch struggled for independence against the might of the greatest power in Europe, and to horror and indignation at the pitiless cruelty and wholesale massacres by which the Spaniards had striven to stamp out resistance.

From the first the people of England would gladly have joined in the fray, and made common cause with their co-religionists; but the queen and her counsellors had been restrained by weighty considerations from embarking in such a struggle. At the commencement of the war the power of Spain overshadowed all Europe. Her infantry were regarded as irresistible. Italy and Germany were virtually her dependencies, and England was but a petty power beside her. Since Agincourt was fought we had taken but little part in wars on the Continent. The feudal system was extinct; we had neither army nor military system; and the only Englishmen with the slightest experience of war were those who had gone abroad to seek their fortunes, and had fought in the armies of one or other of the continental powers. Nor were we yet aware of our naval strength. Drake and Hawkins and the other buccaneers had not yet commenced their private war with Spain, on what was known as the Spanish Main–the waters of the West Indian Islands–and no one dreamed that the time was approaching when England would be able to hold her own against the strength of Spain on the seas.

Thus, then, whatever the private sentiments of Elizabeth and her counsellors, they shrank from engaging England in a life and death struggle with the greatest power of the time; though as the

struggle went on the queen's sympathy with the people of the Netherlands was more and more openly shown. In 1572 she was present at a parade of three hundred volunteers who mustered at Greenwich under Thomas Morgan and Roger Williams for service in the Netherlands. Sir Humphrey Gilbert, half brother of Sir Walter Raleigh, went out a few months later with 1500 men, and from that time numbers of English volunteers continued to cross the seas and join in the struggle against the Spaniards. Nor were the sympathies of the queen confined to allowing her subjects to take part in the fighting; for she sent out large sums of money to the Dutch, and as far as she could, without openly joining them, gave them her aid.

Spain remonstrated continually against these breaches of neutrality, while the Dutch on their part constantly implored her to join them openly; but she continued to give evasive answers to both parties until the assassination of William of Orange on 10th July, 1584, sent a thrill of horror through England, and determined the queen and her advisers to take a more decisive part in the struggle. In the following June envoys from the States arrived in London, and were received with great honour, and a treaty between the two countries was agreed upon. Three months later the queen published a declaration to her people and to Europe at large, setting forth the terrible persecutions and cruelties to which "our next neighbours, the people of the Low Countries," the special allies and friends of England, had been exposed, and stating her determination to aid them to recover

their liberty. The proclamation concluded: "We mean not hereby to make particular profit to ourself and our people, only desiring to obtain, by God's favour, for the Countries, a deliverance of them from war by the Spaniards and foreigners, with a restitution of their ancient liberties and government.

Sir Thomas Cecil was sent out at once as governor of Brill, and Sir Philip Sidney as governor of Flushing, these towns being handed over to England as guarantees by the Dutch. These two officers, with bodies of troops to serve as garrisons, took charge of their respective fortresses in November. Orders were issued for the raising of an army for service in the Low Countries, and Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was appointed by the queen to its command. The decision of the queen was received with enthusiasm in England as well as in Holland, and although the Earl of Leicester was not personally popular, volunteers flocked to his standard.

Breakfast at Hedingham Rectory had been set at an earlier hour than usual on the 6th of December, 1585. There was an unusual stir and excitement in the village, for young Mr. Francis Vere, cousin of the Earl of Oxford, lord of Hedingham and of all the surrounding country, was to start that morning to ride to Colchester, there to join the Earl of Leicester and his following as a volunteer. As soon as breakfast was over young Geoffrey and Lionel Vickars, boys of fourteen and thirteen years old, proceeded to the castle close by, and there mounted the horses provided for them, and rode with Francis Vere to Colchester.

Francis, who was at this time twenty-five years old, was accompanied by his elder brother, John, and his two younger brothers, Robert and Horace, and by many other friends; and it was a gay train that cantered down the valley of the Colne to Colchester. That ancient town was all astir. Gentlemen had ridden in from all the country seats and manors for many miles round, and the quiet streets were alive with people. At two o'clock in the afternoon news arrived that the earl was approaching, and, headed by the bailiffs of the town in scarlet gowns, the multitude moved out to meet the earl on the Lexden road. Presently a long train was seen approaching; for with Leicester were the Earl of Essex, Lords North and Audley, Sir William Russell, Sir Thomas Shirley, and other volunteers, to the number of five hundred horse. All were gaily attired and caparisoned, and the cortege presented a most brilliant appearance. The multitude cheered lustily, the bailiffs presented an address, and followed by his own train and by the gentlemen who had assembled to meet him, the earl rode into the town. He himself took up his abode at the house of Sir Thomas Lucas, while his followers were distributed among the houses of the townsfolk. Two hours after the arrival of the earl, the party from Hedingham took leave of Mr. Francis Vere.

"Goodbye, lads," he said to the young Vickars, "I will keep my promise, never fear; and if the struggle goes on till you are old enough to carry arms, I will, if I am still alive, take you under my leading and teach you the art of war."

Upon the following day the Earl of Leicester and his following

rode to Manningtree, and took boat down the Stour to Harwich, where the fleet, under Admiral William Borough, was lying. Here they embarked, and on the 9th of December sailed for Flushing, where they were joined by another fleet of sixty ships from the Thames.

More than a year passed. The English had fought sturdily in Holland. Mr. Francis Vere had been with his cousin, Lord Willoughby, who was in command of Bergen op Zoom, and had taken part in the first brush with the enemy, when a party of the garrison marched out and attacked a great convoy of four hundred and fifty wagons going to Antwerp, killed three hundred of the enemy, took eighty prisoners, and destroyed all their wagons except twenty-seven, which they carried into the town. Leicester provisioned the town of Grave, which was besieged by the Duke of Parma, the Spanish commander in chief. Axel was captured by surprise, the volunteers swimming across the moat at night, and throwing open the gates. Doesburg was captured, and Zutphen besieged.

Parma marched to its relief, and, under cover of a thick fog, succeeded in getting close at hand before it was known that he was near. Then the English knights and volunteers, 200 in number, mounted in hot haste and charged a great Spanish column of 5000 horse and foot. They were led by Sir William Russell, under whom were Lord Essex, North, Audley, and Willoughby, behind the last of whom rode Francis Vere. For two hours this little band of horse fought desperately in the midst of

the Spanish cavalry, and forced them at last to fall back, but were themselves obliged to retreat when the Spanish infantry came up and opened fire upon them. The English loss was 34 killed and wounded, while 250 of the Spaniards were slain, and three of their colours captured. Among the wounded on the English side was the very noble knight Sir Philip Sidney, who was shot by a musket ball, and died three weeks afterwards.

The successes of the English during these two years were counterbalanced by the cowardly surrender of Grave by its governor, and by the treachery of Sir William Stanley, governor of Deventer, and of Roland Yorke, who commanded the garrisons of the two forts known as the Zutphen Sconces. Both these officers turned traitors and delivered up the posts they commanded to the Spaniards. Their conduct not only caused great material loss to the allies, but it gave rise to much bad feeling between the English and Dutch, the latter complaining that they received but half hearted assistance from the English.

It was not surprising, however, that Leicester was unable to effect more with the little force under his command, for it was necessary not only to raise soldiers, but to invent regulations and discipline. The Spanish system was adopted, and this, the first English regular army, was trained and appointed precisely upon the system of the foe with whom they were fighting. It was no easy task to convert a body of brave knights and gentlemen and sturdy countrymen into regular troops, and to give them the advantages conferred by discipline and order. But the work was

rendered the less difficult by the admixture of the volunteers who had been bravely fighting for ten years under Morgan, Rowland Williams, John Norris, and others. These had had a similar experience on their first arrival in Holland. Several times in their early encounters with the Spaniards the undisciplined young troops had behaved badly; but they had gained experience from their reverses, and had proved themselves fully capable of standing in line even against the splendid pikemen of Spain.

While the English had been drilling and fighting in Holland things had gone on quietly at Hedingham. The village stands near the headwaters of the Colne and Stour, in a rich and beautiful country. On a rising ground behind it stood the castle of the Veres, which was approached from the village by a drawbridge across the moat. There were few more stately piles in England than the seat of the Earl of Oxford. On one side of the great quadrangle was the gatehouse and a lofty tower, on another the great hall and chapel and the kitchens, on a third the suites of apartments of the officials and retinue. In rear were the stables and granaries, the butts and tennis court, beyond which was the court of the tournaments.

In the centre of the quadrangle rose the great keep, which still stands, the finest relic of Norman civil architecture in England. It possessed great strength, and at the same time was richly ornamented with carving. The windows, arches, and fireplaces were decorated with chevron carvings. A beautiful spiral pattern enriched the doorway and pillars of the staircase leading to

galleries cut in the thickness of the wall, with arched openings looking into the hall below. The outlook from the keep extended over the parishes of Castle Hedingham, Sybil Hedingham, Kirby, and Tilbury, all belonging to the Veres–whose property extended far down the pretty valley of the Stour–with the stately Hall of Long Melford, the Priory of Clare, and the little town of Lavenham; indeed, the whole country was dotted with the farm houses and manors of the Veres. Seven miles down the valley of the Colne lies the village of Earl's Colne, with the priory, where ten of the earls of Oxford lie buried with their wives.

The parish church of Castle Hedingham stood at the end of the little village street, and the rectory of Mr. Vickars was close by. The party gathered at morning prayers consisted of Mr. Vickars and his wife, their two sons, Geoffrey and Lionel, and the maidservants, Ruth and Alice. The boys, now fourteen and fifteen years old respectively, were strong grown and sturdy lads, and their father had long since owned with a sigh that neither of them was likely to follow his profession and fill the pulpit at Hedingham Church when he was gone. Nor was this to be wondered at, for lying as it did at the entrance to the great castle of the Veres, the street of the little village was constantly full of armed men, and resounded with the tramp of the horses of richly dressed knights and gay ladies.

Here came great politicians, who sought the friendship and support of the powerful earls of Oxford, nobles and knights, their kinsmen and allies, gentlemen from the wide spreading manors

of the family, stout fighting men who wished to enlist under their banner. At night the sound of music from the castle told of gay entertainments and festive dances, while by day parties of knights and ladies with dogs and falcons sallied out to seek sport over the wide domains. It could hardly be expected, then, that lads of spirit, brought up in the midst of sights and sounds like these, should entertain a thought of settling down to the tranquil life of the church. As long as they could remember, their minds had been fixed upon being soldiers, and fighting some day under the banner of the Veres. They had been a good deal in the castle; for Mr. Vickars had assisted Arthur Golding, the learned instructor to young Edward Vere, the 17th earl, who was born in 1550, and had succeeded to the title at the age of twelve, and he had afterwards been tutor to the earl's cousins, John, Francis, Robert, and Horace, the sons of Geoffrey, fourth son of the 15th earl. These boys were born in 1558, 1560, 1562, and 1565, and lived with their mother at Kirby Hall, a mile from the Castle of Hedingham.

The earl was much attached to his old instructor, and when he was at the castle there was scarce a day but an invitation came down for Mr. Vickars and his wife to be present either at banquet or entertainment. The boys were free to come and go as they chose, and the earl's men-at-arms had orders to afford them all necessary teaching in the use of weapons.

Mr. Vickars considered it his duty to accept the invitations of his friend and patron, but he sorely grudged the time so

abstracted from his favourite books. It was, indeed, a relief to him when the earl, whose love of profusion and luxury made serious inroads even into the splendid possessions of the Veres, went up to court, and peace and quietness reigned in the castle. The rector was fonder of going to Kirby, where John, Geoffrey's eldest son, lived quietly and soberly, his three younger brothers having, when mere boys, embraced the profession of arms, placing themselves under the care of the good soldier Sir William Brownie, who had served for many years in the Low Countries. They occasionally returned home for a time, and were pleased to take notice of the sons of their old tutor, although Geoffrey was six years junior to Horace, the youngest of the brothers.

The young Vickars had much time to themselves, much more, indeed, than their mother considered to be good for them. After their breakfast, which was finished by eight o'clock, their father took them for an hour and heard the lessons they had prepared the day before, and gave them instruction in the Latin tongue. Then they were supposed to study till the bell rang for dinner at twelve; but there was no one to see that they did so, for their father seldom came outside his library door, and their mother was busy with her domestic duties and in dispensing simples to the poor people, who, now that the monasteries were closed, had no medical aid save that which they got from the wives of the gentry or ministers, or from the wise women, of whom there was generally one in every village.

Therefore, after half an hour, or at most an hour, spent in

getting up their tasks, the books would be thrown aside, and the boys be off, either to the river or up to the castle to practice sword play with the men-at-arms, or to the butts with their bows, or to the rabbit warren, where they had leave from the earl to go with their dogs whenever they pleased. Their long excursions were, however, generally deferred until after dinner, as they were then free until suppertime–and even if they did not return after that hour Mrs. Vickars did not chide them unduly, being an easygoing woman, and always ready to make excuses for them.

There were plenty of fish in the river; and the boys knew the pools they loved best, and often returned with their baskets well filled. There were otters on its banks, too; but, though they sometimes chased these pretty creatures, Tan and Turk, their two dogs, knew as well as their masters that they had but small chance of catching them. Sometimes they would take a boat at the bridge and drop down the stream for miles, and once or twice had even gone down to Bricklesey at the mouth of the river. This, however, was an expedition that they never performed alone, making it each time in charge of Master Lirriper, who owned a flat barge, and took produce down to Bricklesey, there to be transhipped into coasters bound for London. He had a married daughter there, and it was at her house the boys had slept when they went there; for the journey down and up again was too long to be performed in a single day.

But this was not the only distant expedition they had made, for they had once gone down the Stour as far as Harwich with their

father when he was called thither on business. To them Harwich with its old walls and the houses crowned up within them, and its busy port with vessels coming in and going out, was most delightful, and they always talked about that expedition as one of the most pleasant recollections of their lives.

After breakfast was over on the 1st of May, 1587, and they had done their lessons with their father, and had worked for an hour by themselves, the boys put by their books and strolled down the village to the bridge. There as usual stood their friend Master Lirriper with his hands deep in his pockets, a place and position in which he was sure to be found when not away in his barge.

"Good morning, Master Lirriper."

"Good morning, Master Geoffrey and Master Lionel."

"So you are not down the river today?"

"No, sir. I am going tomorrow, and this time I shall be away four or five days–maybe even a week."

"Shall you?" the boys exclaimed in surprise. "Why, what are you going to do?"

"I am going round to London in my nephew Joe Chambers' craft."

"Are you really?" Geoffrey exclaimed. "I wish we were going with you. Don't you think you could take us, Master Lirriper?"

The bargeman looked down into the water and frowned. He was slow of speech, but as the minutes went on and he did not absolutely refuse the boys exchanged glances of excitement and hope.

"I dunno how that might be, young sirs," John Lirriper said slowly, after long cogitation. "I dussay my nephew would have no objection, but what would parson say about it?"

"Oh, I don't think he would object," Geoffrey said. "If you go up and ask him, Master Lirriper, and say that you will take care of us, you know, I don't see why he should say no."

"Like enough you would be ill," John Lirriper said after another long pause. "It's pretty rough sometimes.

"Oh, we shouldn't mind that," Lionel protested. "We should like to see the waves and to be in a real ship."

"It's nothing much of a ship," the boatman said. "She is a ketch of about ten tons and carries three hands."

"Oh, we don't care how small she is if we can only go in her; and you would be able to show us London, and we might even see the queen. Oh, do come up with us and ask father, Master Lirriper."

"Perhaps parson wouldn't be pleased, young sirs, and, might say I was putting wandering thoughts into your heads; and Mistress Vickars might think it a great liberty on my part."

"Oh, no, she wouldn't, Master Lirriper. Besides, we will say we asked you."

"But suppose any harm comes to you, what would they say to me then?"

"Oh, there's no fear of any harm coming to us. Besides, in another year or two we mean to go over to the Low Countries and fight the Spaniards, and what's a voyage to London to that?"

"Well, I will think about it," John Lirriper said cautiously.

"No, no, Master Lirriper; if you get thinking about it it will never be done. Do come up with us at once," and each of them got hold of one of the boatman's arms.

"Well, the parson can but say no," he said, as he suffered himself to be dragged away. "And I don't say as it isn't reasonable that you should like to see something of the world, young sirs; but I don't know how the parson will take it."

Mr. Vickars looked up irritably from his books when the servant came in and said that Master Lirriper wished to see him.

"What does he want at this hour?" he said. "You know, Ruth, I never see people before dinner. Any time between that and supper I am at their service, but it's too bad being disturbed now."

"I told him so, sir; but Master Geoffrey and Master Lionel were with him, and they said he wanted particular to see you, and they wanted particular too."

The clergyman sighed as he put his book down.

"If Geoffrey and Lionel have concerned themselves in the matter, Ruth, I suppose I must see the man; but it's very hard being disturbed like this. Well, Master Lirriper, what is it?" he asked, as the boatman accompanied by Geoffrey and Lionel entered the room. Master Lirriper twirled his hat in his hand. Words did not come easily to him at the best of times, and this was a business that demanded thought and care. Long before he had time to fix upon an appropriate form of words Geoffrey broke in:

"This is what it is, father. Master Lirriper is going down the river to Bricklesey tomorrow, and then he is going on board his nephew's ship. She is a ketch, and she carries ten tons, though I don't know what it is she carries; and she's going to London, and he is going in her, and he says if you will let him he will take us with him, and will show us London, and take great care of us. It will be glorious, father, if you will only let us go."

Mr. Vickars looked blankly as Geoffrey poured out his torrent of words. His mind was still full of the book he had been reading, and he hardly took in the meaning of Geoffrey's words.

"Going in a ketch!" he repeated. "Going to catch something, I suppose you mean? Do you mean he is going fishing?"

"No, father,–going in a ketch. A ketch is a sort of ship, father, though I don't quite know what sort of ship. What sort of ship is a ketch, Master Lirriper?"

"A ketch is a two masted craft, Master Geoffrey," John Lirriper said. "She carries a big mizzen sail."

"There, you see, father," Geoffrey said triumphantly; "she carries a big mizzen sail. That's what she is, you see; and he is going to show us London, and will take great care of us if you will let us go with him."

"Do you mean, Master Lirriper," Mr. Vickars asked slowly, "that you are going to London in some sort of ship, and want to take my sons with you?"

"Well, sir, I am going to London, and the young masters seemed to think that they would like to go with me, if so be you

would have no objection."

"I don't know," Mr. Vickars said, "It is a long passage, Master Lirriper; and, as I have heard, often a stormy one. I don't think my wife–"

"Oh, yes, father," Lionel broke in. "If you say yes, mother is sure to say yes; she always does, you know. And, you see, it will be a great thing for us to see London. Every one else seems to have seen London, and I am sure that it would do us good. And we might even see the queen."

"I think that they would be comfortable, sir," John Lirriper put in. "You see, my nephew's wife is daughter of a citizen, one Master Swindon, a ship's chandler, and he said there would be a room there for me, and they would make me heartily welcome. Now, you see, sir, the young masters could have that room, and I could very well sleep on board the ketch; and they would be out of all sort of mischief there."

"That would be a very good plan certainly, Master Lirriper. Well, well, I don't know what to say."

"Say yes, father," Geoffrey said as he saw Mr. Vickars glance anxiously at the book he had left open. "If you say yes, you see it will be a grand thing for you, our being away for a week with nothing to disturb you."

"Well, well," Mr. Vickars said, "you must ask your mother. If she makes no objection, then I suppose you can go," and Mr. Vickars hastily took up his book again.

The boys ran off to the kitchen, where their mother was

superintending the brewing of some broth for a sick woman down the village.

"Mother!" Geoffrey exclaimed, "Master Lirriper's going to London in a ketch–a ship with a big mizzen sail, you know–and he has offered to take us with him and show us London. And father has said yes, and it's all settled if you have no objection; and of course you haven't."

"Going to London, Geoffrey!" Mrs. Vickars exclaimed aghast. "I never heard of such a thing. Why, like enough you will be drowned on the way and never come back again. Your father must be mad to think of such a thing."

"Oh, no, mother; I am sure it will do us a lot of good. And we may see the queen, mother. And as for drowning, why, we can both swim ever so far. Besides, people don't get drowned going to London. Do they, Master Lirriper?"

John was standing bashfully at the door of the kitchen. "Well, not as a rule, Master Geoffrey," he replied. "They comes and they goes, them that are used to it, maybe a hundred times without anything happening to them."

"There! You hear that, mother? They come and go hundreds of times. Oh, I am sure you are not going to say no. That would be too bad when father has agreed to it. Now, mother, please tell Ruth to run away at once and get a wallet packed with our things. Of course we shall want our best clothes; because people dress finely in London, and it would never do if we saw the queen and we hadn't our best doublets on, for she would think that we didn't

know what was seemly down at Hedingham."

"Well, my dears, of course if it is all settled–"

"Oh, yes, mother, it is quite all settled."

"Then it's no use my saying anything more about it, but I think your father might have consulted me before he gave his consent to your going on such a hazardous journey as this."

"He did want to consult you, mother. But then, you see, he wanted to consult his books even more, and he knew very well that you would agree with him; and you know you would too. So please don't say anything more about it, but let Ruth run upstairs and see to our things at once.

"There, you see, Master Lirriper, it is all settled. And what time do you start tomorrow? We will be there half an hour before, anyhow."

"I shall go at seven from the bridge. Then I shall just catch the turn of the tide and get to Bricklesey in good time."

"I never did see such boys," Mrs. Vickars said when John Lirriper had gone on his way. "As for your father, I am surprised at him in countenancing you. You will be running all sorts of risks. You may be drowned on the way, or killed in a street brawl, or get mixed up in a plot. There is no saying what may not happen. And here it is all settled before I have even time to think about it, which is most inconsiderate of your father."

"Oh, we shall get back again without any harm, mother. And as to getting killed in a street brawl, Lionel and I can use our hangers as well as most of them. Besides, nothing of that sort

is going to happen to us. Now, mother, please let Ruth go at once, and tell her to put up our puce doublets that we had for the jousting at the castle, and our red hose and our dark green cloth slashed trunks."

"There is plenty of time for that, Geoffrey, as you are not going until tomorrow. Besides, I can't spare Ruth now, but she shall see about it after dinner."

There was little sleep for the boys that night. A visit to London had long been one of their wildest ambitions, and they could scarcely believe that thus suddenly and without preparation it was about to take place. Their father had some time before promised that he would someday make request to one or other of the young Veres to allow them to ride to London in his suite, but the present seemed to them an even more delightful plan. There would be the pleasure of the voyage, and moreover it would be much more lively for them to be able to see London under the charge of John Lirriper than to be subject to the ceremonial and restraint that would be enforced in the household of the Veres. They were, then, at the appointed place a full hour before the time named, with wallets containing their clothes, and a basket of provisions that their mother had prepared for them. Having stowed these away in the little cabin, they walked up and down impatiently until Master Lirriper himself appeared.

"You are up betimes, my young masters," the boatman said. "The church has not yet struck seven o'clock."

"We have been here ever so long, Master Lirriper. We could

not sleep much last night, and got up when it chimed five, being afraid that we might drop off to sleep and be late."

"Well, we shall not be long before we are off. Here comes my man Dick, and the tide is just on the turn. The sky looks bright, and the weather promises well. I will just go round to the cottage and fetch up my things, and then we shall be ready."

In ten minutes they pushed off from the shore. John and his man got out long poles shod with iron, and with these set to work to punt the barge along. Now that they were fairly on their way the boys quieted down, and took their seats on the sacks of flour with which the boat was laden, and watched the objects on the bank as the boat made her way quietly along.

Halstead was the first place passed. This was the largest town near Hedingham, and was a place of much importance in their eyes. Then they passed Stanstead Hall and Earl's Colne on their right, Colne Wake on their left, and Chapel Parish on their right. Then there was a long stretch without any large villages, until they came in sight of the bridge above Colchester. A few miles below the town the river began to widen. The banks were low and flat, and they were now entering an arm of the sea. Half an hour later the houses and church of Bricklesey came in sight. Tide was almost low when they ran on to the mud abreast of the village, but John put on a pair of high boots and carried the boys ashore one after the other on his back, and then went up with them to the house where they were to stop for the night.

Here, although not expected, they were heartily welcomed by

John's daughter.

"If father had told me that you had been coming, Masters Vickars, I would have had a proper dinner for you; but though he sent word yesterday morning that he should be over today, he did not say a word about your coming with them."

"He did not know himself," Geoffrey said; "it was only settled at ten o'clock yesterday. But do not trouble yourself about the dinner. In the first place, we are so pleased at going that we don't care a bit what we eat, and in the second place we had breakfast on board the boat, and we were both so hungry that I am sure we could go till supper time without eating if necessary."

"Where are you going, father?" the young woman asked.

"I am going to set about unloading the flour."

"Why, it's only a quarter to twelve, and dinner just ready. The fish went into the frying pan as you came up from the boat. You know we generally dine at half past eleven, but we saw you coming at a distance and put it off. It's no use your starting now."

"Well, I suppose it isn't. And I don't know what the young masters' appetite may be, but mine is pretty good, I can tell you."

"I never knew it otherwise, father," the woman laughed. "Ah, here is my Sam. Sam, here's father brought these two young gentlemen. They are the sons of Mr. Vickars, the parson at Hedingham. They are going to stop here tonight, and are going with him in the Susan tomorrow to London."

"Glad to see you, young masters," Sam said. "I have often heard Ann talk of your good father. I have just been on board

the Susan, for I am sending up a couple of score sides of bacon in her, and have been giving Joe Chambers, her master, a list of things he is to get there and bring down for me.

"Now then, girl, bustle about and get dinner on as soon as you can. We are half an hour late. I am sure the young gentlemen here must be hungry. There's nothing like being on the water for getting an appetite."

A few minutes later a great dish of fish, a loaf of bread and some wooden platters, were placed on the table, and all set to at once. Forks had not yet come into use, and tablecloths were unknown, except among the upper classes. The boys found that in spite of their hearty breakfast their appetites were excellent. The fish were delicious, the bread was home baked, and the beer from Colchester, which was already famous for its brewing. When they had finished, John Lirriper asked them if they would rather see what there was to be seen in the village, or go off to the ketch. They at once chose the latter alternative. On going down to the water's edge they found that the tide had risen sufficiently to enable Dick to bring the barge alongside the jetty. They were soon on board.

"Which is the Susan, Master Lirriper?"

"That's her lying out there with two others. She is the one lowest down the stream. We shall just fetch her comfortably."

CHAPTER II
A MEETING IN CHEPE

A row of ten minutes took the boat with Master Lirriper and the two boys alongside the ketch.

"How are you, Joe Chambers?" Master Lirriper hailed the skipper as he appeared on the deck of the Susan. "I have brought you two more passengers for London. They are going there under my charge."

"The more the merrier, Uncle John," the young skipper replied. "There are none others going this journey, so though our accommodation is not very extensive, we can put them up comfortably enough if they don't mind roughing it."

"Oh, we don't mind that," Geoffrey said, as they climbed on board; "besides, there seems lots of room."

"Not so much as you think," the skipper replied. "She is a roomy craft is the Susan; but she is pretty nigh all hold, and we are cramped a little in the fo'castle. Still we can sleep six, and that's just the number we shall have, for we carry a man and a boy besides myself. I think your flour will about fill her up, Master Lirriper. We have a pretty full cargo this time."

"Well, we shall soon see," John Lirriper said. "Are you ready to take the flour on board at once? Because, if so, we will begin to discharge."

"Yes, I am quite ready. You told me you were going to bring forty sacks, and I have left the middle part of the hold empty for them. Sam Hunter's bacon will stow in on the top of your sacks, and just fill her up to the beams there, as I reckon. I'll go below and stow them away as you hand them across."

In an hour the sacks of flour were transferred from the barge to the hold of the Susan, and the sides of bacon then placed upon them.

"It's a pity we haven't all the rest of the things on board," the skipper said, "and then we could have started by this evening's tide instead of waiting till the morning. The wind is fair, and I hate throwing away a fair wind. There is no saying where it may blow tomorrow, but I shouldn't be at all surprised if it isn't round to the south, and that will be foul for us till we get pretty nigh up into the mouth of the river. However, I gave them till tonight for getting all their things on board and must therefore wait."

To the boys the Susan appeared quite a large craft, for there was not water up at Hedingham for vessels of her size; and though they had seen ships at Harwich, they had never before put foot on anything larger than Master Lirriper's barge. The Susan was about forty feet long by twelve feet beam, and drew, as her skipper informed them, near five feet of water. She was entirely decked. The cabin in the bows occupied some fourteen feet in length. The rest was devoted to cargo. They descended into the cabin, which seemed to them very dark, there being no light save what came down through the small hatchway. Still it looked snug

and comfortable. There was a fireplace on one side of the ladder by which they had descended, and on this side there were two bunks, one above the other. On the other side there were lockers running along the entire length of the cabin. Two could sleep on these and two on the bunks above them.

"Now, young masters, you will take those two bunks on the top there. John Lirriper and I will sleep on the lockers underneath you. The man and the boy have the two on the other side. I put you on the top because there is a side board, and you can't fall out if she rolls, and besides, the bunks are rather wider than the lockers below. If the wind is fair you won't have much of our company, because we shall hold on till we moor alongside the wharves of London; but if it's foul, or there is not enough of it to take us against tide, we have to anchor on the ebb, and then of course we turn in."

"How long do you take getting from here to London?"

"Ah, that I can tell you more about when I see what the weather is like in the morning. With a strong fair wind I have done it in twenty-four hours, and again with the wind foul it has taken me nigh a week. Taking one trip with another I should put it at three days."

"Well, now we will be going ashore," John Lirriper said. "I will leave my barge alongside till tide turns, for I could not get her back again to the jetty so long as it is running in strong, so I will be off again in a couple of hours."

So saying he hauled up the dinghy that was towing behind

the barge, and he and Dick rowed the two boys ashore. Then he walked along with them to a spot where several craft were hauled up, pointing out to them the differences in their rig and build, and explained their purpose, and gave them the names of the principal ropes and stays.

"Now," he said, "it's getting on for supper time, and it won't do to keep them waiting, for Ann is sure to have got some cakes made, and there's nothing puts a woman out more than people not being in to meals when they have something special ready. After that I shall go out with Dick and bring the barge ashore. He will load up her tomorrow, and take her back single handed; which can be done easy enough in such weather as this, but it is too much for one man if there is a strong wind blowing and driving her over to the one side or other of the river."

As John Lirriper had expected, his daughter had prepared a pile of hot cakes for supper, and her face brightened up when she saw the party return punctually. The boys had been up early, and had slept but little the night before, and were not sorry at eight o'clock to lie down on the bed of freshly cut rushes covered with home spun sheets, for regular beds of feathers were still but little used in England. At five o'clock they were astir again, and their hostess insisted on their eating a manchet of bread with some cheese, washed down by a stoup of ale, before starting. Dick had the boat at the jetty ready to row them off, and as soon as they were on board the Susan preparations were made for a start.

The mainsail was first hoisted, its size greatly surprising the

boys; then the foresail and jib were got up, and lastly the mizzen. Then the capstan was manned, and the anchor slowly brought on board, and the sails being sheeted home, the craft began to steal through the water. The tide was still draining up, and she had not as yet swung. The wind was light, and, as the skipper had predicted, was nearly due south. As the ketch made its way out from the mouth of the river, and the wide expanse of water opened before them, the boys were filled with delight. They had taken their seats, one on each side of the skipper, who was at the tiller.

"I suppose you steer by the compass, Master Chambers?" Geoffrey said. "Which is the compass? I have heard about it, always pointing to the north."

"It's down below, young sir; I will show it you presently. We steer by that at night, or when it's foggy; but on a fine day like this there is no need for it. There are marks put up on all the sands, and we steer by them. You see, the way the wind is now we can lay our course for the Whittaker. That's a cruel sand, that is, and stretches out a long way from a point lying away on the right there. Once past that we bear away to the southwest, for we are then, so to speak, fairly in the course of the river. There is many a ship has been cast away on the Whittaker. Not that it is worse than other sands. There are scores of them lying in the mouth of the river, and if it wasn't for the marks there would be no sailing in or out."

"Who put up the marks?" Lionel asked.

"They are put up by men who make a business of it. There is one boat of them sails backwards and forwards where the river begins to narrow above Sheerness, and every ship that goes up or down pays them something according to her size. Others cruise about with long poles, putting them in the sands wherever one gets washed away. They have got different marks on them. A single cross piece, or two cross pieces, or a circle, or a diamond; so that each sand has got its own particular mark. These are known to the masters of all ships that go up and down the river, and so they can tell exactly where they are, and what course to take. At night they anchor, for there would be no possibility of finding the way up or down in the dark. I have heard tell from mariners who have sailed abroad that there ain't a place anywhere with such dangerous sands as those we have got here at the mouth of the Thames."

In the first three or four hours' sail Geoffrey and Lionel acquired much nautical knowledge. They learned the difference between the mainmast and the mizzen, found that all the strong ropes that kept the masts erect and stiff were called stays, that the ropes that hoist sails are called halliards, and that sheets is the name given to the ropes that restrain the sails at the lower corner, and are used to haul them in more tightly when sailing close to the wind, or to ease them off when the wind is favourable. They also learned that the yards at the head of the main and mizzen sails are called gaffs, and those at the bottom, booms.

"I think that's about enough for you to remember in one day,

young masters," John Lirriper said. "You bear all that in your mind, and remember that each halliard and sheet has the name of the sail to which it is attached, and you will have learnt enough to make yourself useful, and can lend a hand when the skipper calls out, `Haul in the jib sheet,' or `Let go the fore halliards.' Now sit yourselves down again and see what is doing. That beacon you can just see right ahead marks the end of the Whittaker Spit. When we get there we shall drop anchor till the tide turns. You see we are going across it now, but when we round that beacon we shall have it dead against us, and the wind would be too light to take us against it even if it were not from the quarter it is. You see there are two or three other craft brought up there."

"Where have they come from, do you think, Master Lirriper?"

"Well, they may have come out from Burnham, or they may have come down from London and be going up to Burnham or to Bricklesey when the tide turns. There is a large ship anchored in the channel beyond the Whittaker. Of course she is going up when tide begins to flow. And there are the masts of two vessels right over there. They are in another channel. Between us and them there is a line of sands that you will see will show above the water when it gets a bit lower. That is the main channel, that is; and vessels coming from the south with a large draught of water generally use that, while this is the one that is handiest for ships from the north. Small vessels from the south come in by a channel a good bit beyond those ships. That is the narrowest of the three; and even light draught vessels don't use it much unless

the wind is favourable, for there is not much room for them to beat up if the wind is against them."

"What is to beat up, Master Lirriper?"

"Well, you will see about that presently. I don't think we shall be able to lay our course beyond the Whittaker. To lay our course means to steer the way we want to go; and if we can't do that we shall have to beat, and that is tedious work with a light wind like this."

They dropped anchor off the beacon, and the captain said that this was the time to take breakfast. The lads already smelt an agreeable odour arising from the cabin forward, where the boy had been for some time busily engaged, and soon the whole party were seated on the lockers in the cabin devouring fried fish.

"Master Chambers," Geoffrey said, "we have got two boiled pullets in our basket. Had we not better have them for dinner? They were cooked the evening before we came away, and I should think they had better be eaten now."

"You had better keep them for yourselves, Master Geoffrey," the skipper said. "We are accustomed to living on fish, but like enough you would get tired of it before we got to London."

But this the boys would not hear of, and it was accordingly arranged that the dinner should be furnished from the contents of the basket.

As soon as tide turned the anchor was hove up and the Susan got under way again. The boys soon learnt the meaning of the word beating, and found that it meant sailing backwards and

forwards across the channel, with the wind sometimes on one side of the boat and sometimes on the other. Geoffrey wanted very much to learn why, when the wind was so nearly ahead, the boat advanced instead of drifting backwards or sideways. But this was altogether beyond the power of either Master Lirriper or Joe Chambers to explain. They said every one knew that when the sails were full a vessel went in the direction in which her head pointed. "It's just the same way with yourself, Master Geoffrey. You see, when you look one way that's the way you go. When you turn your head and point another way, of course you go off that way; and it's just the same thing with the ship."

"I don't think it's the same thing, Master Lirriper," Geoffrey said puzzled. "In one case the power that makes one go comes from the inside, and so one can go in any direction one likes; in the other it comes from outside, and you would think the ship would have to go any way the wind pushes her. If you stand up and I give you a push, I push you straight away from me. You don't go sideways or come forward in the direction of my shoulder, which is what the ship does."

John Lirriper took off his cap and scratched his head.

"I suppose it is as you say, Master Geoffrey, though I never thought of it before. There is some reason, no doubt, why the craft moves up against the wind so long as the sails are full, instead of drifting away to leeward; though I never heard tell of it, and never heard anyone ask before. I dare say a learned man could tell why it is; and if you ask your good father when you go

back I would wager he can explain it. It always seems to me as if a boat have got some sort of sense, just like a human being or a horse, and when she knows which way you wants her to go she goes. That's how it seems to me–ain't it, Joe?"

"Something like that, uncle. Every one knows that a boat's got her humours, and sometimes she sails better than she does others; and each boat's got her own fancies. Some does their best when they are beating, and some are lively in a heavy sea, and seem as if they enjoy it; and others get sulky, and don't seem to take the trouble to lift their bows up when a wave meets them; and they groans and complains if the wind is too hard for them, just like a human being. When you goes to a new vessel you have got to learn her tricks and her ways and what she will do, and what she won't do, and just to humour her as you would a child. I don't say as I think she is actually alive; but every sailor will tell you that there is something about her that her builders never put there."

"That's so," John Lirriper agreed. "Look at a boat that is hove up when her work's done and going to be broke up. Why, anyone can tell her with half an eye. She looks that forlorn and melancholy that one's inclined to blubber at the sight of her. She don't look like that at any other time. When she is hove up she is going to die, and she knows it."

"But perhaps that's because the paint's off her sides and the ropes all worn and loose," Geoffrey suggested.

But Master Lirriper waved the suggestion aside as unworthy even of an answer, and repeated, "She knows it. Anyone can see

that with half an eye."

Geoffrey and Lionel talked the matter over when they were sitting together on deck apart from the others. It was an age when there were still many superstitions current in the land. Even the upper classes believed in witches and warlocks, in charms and spells, in lucky and unlucky days, in the arts of magic, in the power of the evil eye; and although to the boys it seemed absurd that a vessel should have life, they were not prepared altogether to discredit an idea that was evidently thoroughly believed by those who had been on board ships all their lives. After talking it over for some time they determined to submit the question to their father on their return.

It took them two more tides before they were off Sheerness. The wind was now more favourable, and having increased somewhat in strength, the Susan made her way briskly along, heeling over till the water ran along her scuppers. There was plenty to see now, for there were many fishing boats at work, some belonging, as Master Chambers told them, to the Medway, others to the little village of Leigh, whose church they saw at the top of the hill to their right. They met, too, several large craft coming down the river, and passed more than one, for the Susan was a fast boat.

"They would beat us," the skipper said when the boys expressed their surprise at their passing such large vessels, "if the wind were stronger or the water rough. We are doing our best, and if the wind rises I shall have to take in sail; while they could

carry all theirs if it blew twice as hard. Then in a sea, weight and power tell; a wave that would knock the way almost out of us would hardly affect them at all."

So well did the Susan go along, that before the tide was much more than half done they passed the little village of Gravesend on their left, with the strong fort of Tilbury on the opposite shore, with its guns pointing on the river, and ready to give a good account of any Spaniard who should venture to sail up the Thames. Then at the end of the next reach the hamlet of Grays was passed on the right; a mile further Greenhithe on the left. Tide was getting slack now, but the Susan managed to get as far as Purfleet, and then dropped her anchor.

"This is our last stopping place," Joe Chambers said. "The morning tide will carry us up to London Bridge."

"Then you will not go on with tonight's tide?" Geoffrey asked.

"No; the river gets narrower every mile, and I do not care to take the risk of navigating it after dark, especially as there is always a great deal of shipping moored above Greenwich. Tide will begin to run up at about five o'clock, and by ten we ought to be safely moored alongside near London Bridge. So we should not gain a great deal by going on this evening instead of tomorrow morning, and I don't suppose you are in a particular hurry."

"Oh, no," Lionel said. "We would much rather go on in the morning, otherwise we should miss everything by the way; and there is the Queen's Palace at Greenwich that I want to see above all things."

Within a few minutes of the hour the skipper had named for their arrival, the Susan was moored alongside some vessels lying off one of the wharves above the Tower. The boys' astonishment had risen with every mile of their approach to the city, and they were perfectly astounded at the amount of shipping that they now beheld. The great proportion were of course coasters, like themselves, but there were many large vessels among them, and of these fully half were flying foreign colours. Here were traders from the Netherlands, with the flag that the Spaniards had in vain endeavoured to lower, flying at their mastheads. Here were caravels from Venice and Genoa, laden with goods from the East. Among the rest Master Chambers pointed out to the lads the ship in which Sir Francis Drake had circumnavigated the world, and that in which Captain Stevens had sailed to India, round the Cape of Good Hope. There were many French vessels also in the Pool, and indeed almost every flag save that of Spain was represented. Innumerable wherries darted about among the shipping, and heavier cargo boats dropped along in more leisurely fashion. Across the river, a quarter of a mile above the point at which they were lying, stretched London Bridge, with its narrow arches and the houses projecting beyond it on their supports of stout timbers. Beyond, on the right, rising high above the crowded roofs, was the lofty spire of St. Paul's. The boys were almost awed by this vast assemblage of buildings. That London was a great city they had known, but they were not prepared for so immense a difference between it and the place where they had

lived all their lives. Only with the Tower were they somewhat disappointed. It was very grand and very extensive, but not so much grander than the stately abode of the Veres as they had looked for.

"I wouldn't change, if I were the earl, with the queen's majesty," Geoffrey said. "Of course it is larger than Hedingham, but not so beautiful, and it is crowded in by the houses, and has not like our castle a fair lookout on all sides. Why, there can be no hunting or hawking near here, and I can't think what the nobles can find to do all day."

"Now, young sirs," Master Lirriper said, "if you will get your wallets we will go ashore at once."

The boys were quite bewildered as they stepped ashore by the bustle and confusion. Brawny porters carrying heavy packages on their backs pushed along unceremoniously, saying from time to time in a mechanical sort of way, "By your leave, sir!" but pushing on and shouldering passersby into the gutter without the smallest compunction. The narrowness and dinginess of the streets greatly surprised and disappointed the boys, who found that in these respects even Harwich compared favourably with the region they were traversing. Presently, however, after passing through several lanes and alleys, they emerged into a much broader street, alive with shops. The people who were walking here were for the most part well dressed and of quiet demeanour, and there was none of the rough bustle that had prevailed in the riverside lanes.

"This is Eastchepe," their conductor said; "we have not far to go now. The street in which my friend dwells lies to the right, between this and Tower Street. I could have taken you a shorter way there, but I thought that your impressions of London would not be favourable did I take you all the way through those ill smelling lanes."

In a quarter of an hour they arrived at their destination, and entered the shop, which smelt strongly of tar; coils of rope of all sizes were piled up one upon another by the walls, while on shelves above them were blocks, lanterns, compasses, and a great variety of gear of whose use the boys were ignorant. The chandler was standing at his door.

"I am right glad to see you, Master Lirriper," he said, "and have been expecting you for the last two or three days. My wife would have it that some evil must have befallen you; but you know what women are. They make little allowance for time or tide or distance, but expect that every one can so arrange his journeys as to arrive at the very moment when they begin to expect him. But who have you here with you?"

"These are the sons of the worshipful Mr. Vickars, the rector of our parish and tutor to the Earl of Oxford and several of the young Veres, his cousins–a wise gentleman and a kind one, and much loved among us. He has entrusted his two sons to me that I might show them somewhat of this city of yours. I said that I was right sure that you and your good dame would let them occupy the chamber you intended for me, while I can make good shift

on board the Susan."

"Nay, nay, Master Lirriper; our house is big enough to take in you and these two young masters, and Dorothy would deem it a slight indeed upon her hospitality were you not to take up your abode here too.

"You will be heartily welcome, young sirs, and though such accommodation as we can give you will not be equal to that which you are accustomed to, I warrant me that you will find it a pleasant change after that poky little cabin on board the Susan. I know it well, for I supply her with stores, and have often wondered how men could accustom themselves to pass their lives in places where there is scarce room to turn, to say nothing of the smell of fish that always hangs about it. But if you will follow me I will take you up to my good dame, to whose care I must commit you for the present, as my foreman, John Watkins, is down by the riverside seeing to the proper delivery of divers stores on board a ship which sails with the next tide for Holland. My apprentices, too, are both out, as I must own is their wont. They always make excuses to slip down to the riverside when there is aught doing, and I am far too easy with the varlets. So at present, you see, I cannot long leave my shop."

So saying the chandler preceded them up a wide staircase that led from a passage behind the shop, and the boys perceived that the house was far more roomy and comfortable than they had judged from its outward appearance. Turning to the left when he reached the top of the stairs the chandler opened a door.

"Dorothy," he said, "here is your kinsman, Master Lirriper, who has suffered none of the misadventures you have been picturing to yourself for the last two days, and he has brought with him these young gentlemen, sons of the rector of Hedingham, to show them something of London."

"You are welcome, young gentlemen," Dame Dorothy said, "though why anyone should come to London when he can stay away from it I know not."

"Why, Dorothy, you are always running down our city, though I know right well that were I to move down with you to your native Essex again you would very soon cry out for the pleasures of the town."

"That would I not," she said. "I would be well contented to live in fresh country air all the rest of my life, though I do not say that London has not its share of pleasures also, though I care but little for them."

"Ah, Master Lirriper," her husband said laughing, "you would not think, to hear her talk, that there is not a feast or a show that Dorothy would stay away from. She never misses an opportunity, I warrant you, of showing herself off in her last new kirtle and gown. But I must be going down; there is no one below, and if a customer comes and finds the shop empty he will have but a poor idea of me, and will think that I am away gossiping instead of attending to my business."

"Are you hungry, young sirs?" the dame asked. "Because if so the maid shall bring up a manchet of bread and a cup of sack;

if not, our evening meal will be served in the course of an hour."

The boys both said that they were perfectly able to wait until the meal came; and Geoffrey added, "If you will allow us, mistress, as doubtless you have private matters to talk of with Master Lirriper, my brother and I will walk out for an hour to see something of the town."

"Mind that you lose not your way," Master Lirriper said. "Do not go beyond Eastchepe, I beg you. There are the shops to look at there, and the fashions of dress and other matters that will occupy your attention well enough for that short time. Tomorrow morning I will myself go with you, and we can then wander further abroad. I have promised your good father to look after you, you know; and it will be but a bad beginning if you meet with any untoward adventure upon this the first day of your arrival here."

"We will not go beyond the limits of Eastchepe; and as to adventures, I can't see very well how any can befall us."

"Oh, there are plenty of adventures to be met with in London, young sir; and I shall be well content if on the day when we again embark on board the Susan none of them have fallen to your share."

The two lads accordingly sallied out and amused themselves greatly by staring at the goods exhibited in the open shops. They were less surprised at the richness and variety of the silver work, at the silks from the East, the costly satins, and other stuffs, than most boys from the country would have been, for they

were accustomed to the splendour and magnificence displayed by the various noble guests at the castle, and saw nothing here that surpassed the brilliant shows made at the jousting and entertainments at Hedingham.

It was the scene that was novel to them: the shouts of the apprentices inviting attention to their employers' wares, the crowd that filled the street, consisting for the most part of the citizens themselves, but varied by nobles and knights of the court, by foreigners from many lands, by soldiers and men-at-arms from the Tower, by countrymen and sailors. Their amusement was sometimes turned into anger by the flippant remarks of the apprentices; these varlets, perceiving easily enough by the manner of their attire that they were from the country, were not slow, if their master happened for the moment to be absent, in indulging in remarks that set Geoffrey and Lionel into a fever to commit a breach of the peace. The "What do you lack, masters?" with which they generally addressed passersby would be exchanged for remarks such as, "Do not trouble the young gentlemen, Nat. Do you not see they are up in the town looking for some of their master's calves?" or, "Look you, Philip, here are two rustics who have come up to town to learn manners."

"I quite see, Geoffrey," Lionel said, taking his brother by the arm and half dragging him away as he saw that he was clenching his fist and preparing to avenge summarily one of these insults even more pointed than usual, "that Master Lirriper was not very far out, and there is no difficulty in meeting with adventures in

the streets of London. However, we must not give him occasion on this our first stroll in the streets to say that we cannot be trusted out of his sight. If we were to try to punish these insolent varlets we should have them on us like a swarm of bees, and should doubtless get worsted in the encounter, and might even find ourselves hauled off to the lockup, and that would be a nice tale for Master Lirriper to carry back to Hedingham."

"That is true enough, Lionel; but it is not easy to keep one's temper when one is thus tried. I know not how it is they see so readily that we are strangers, for surely we have mixed enough with the earl's family and friends to have rubbed off the awkwardness that they say is common to country folk; and as to our dress, I do not see much difference between its fashion and that of other people. I suppose it is because we look interested in what is going on, instead of strolling along like those two youths opposite with our noses in the air, as if we regarded the city and its belongings as infinitely below our regard. Well, I think we had best be turning back to Master Swindon's; it will not do to be late for our meal."

"Well, young sirs, what do you think of our shops?" Dame Swindon asked as they entered.

"The shops are well enough," Geoffrey replied; "but your apprentices seem to me to be an insolent set of jackanapes, who take strange liberties with passersby, and who would be all the better for chastisement. If it hadn't been that Lionel and I did not wish to become engaged in a brawl, we should have given some

of them lessons in manners."

"They are free in speech," Dame Swindon said, "and are an impudent set of varlets. They have quick eyes and ready tongues, and are no respecters of persons save of their masters and of citizens in a position to lay complaints against them and to secure them punishment. They hold together greatly, and it is as well that you should not become engaged in a quarrel with them. At times they have raised serious tumults, and have even set not only the watch but the citizens at large at defiance. Strong measures have been several times taken against them; but they are a powerful body, seeing that in every shop there are one or more of them, and they can turn out with their clubs many thousand strong. They have what they call their privileges, and are as ready to defend them as are the citizens of London to uphold their liberties. Ordinances have been passed many times by the fathers of the city, regulating their conduct and the hours at which they may be abroad and the carrying of clubs and matters of this kind, but the apprentices seldom regard them, and if the watch arrest one for a breach of regulations, he raises a cry, and in two or three minutes a swarm of them collect and rescue the offender from his hands. Therefore it is seldom that the watch interferes with them."

"It would almost seem then that the apprentices are in fact the masters," Geoffrey said.

"Not quite as bad as that," Master Swindon replied. "There are the rules which they have to obey when at home, and if not

they get a whipping; but it is difficult to keep a hand over them when they are abroad. After the shops are closed and the supper over they have from time immemorial the right to go out for two hours' exercise. They are supposed to go and shoot at the butts; but archery, I grieve to say, is falling into disrepute, and although many still go to the butts the practice is no longer universal. But here is supper."

Few words were spoken during the meal. The foreman and the two apprentices came up and sat down with the family, and it was not until these had retired that the conversation was again resumed.

"Where are you going to take them tomorrow, Master Lirriper?"

"Tomorrow we will see the city, the shops in Chepe, the Guildhall, and St. Paul's, then we shall issue out from Temple Bar and walk along the Strand through the country to Westminster and see the great abbey, then perhaps take a boat back. The next day, if the weather be fine, we will row up to Richmond and see the palace there, and I hope you will go with us, Mistress Dorothy; it is a pleasant promenade and a fashionable one, and methinks the river with its boats is after all the prettiest sight in London."

"Ah, you think there can be nothing pretty without water. That is all very well for one who is ever afloat, Master Lirriper; but give me Chepe at high noon with all its bravery of dress, and the bright shops, and the gallants of the court, and our own citizens

too, who if not quite so gay in colour are proper men, better looking to my mind than some of the fops with their silver and satins."

"That's right, Dorothy," her husband said; "spoken like the wife of a citizen."

All these plans were destined to be frustrated. As soon as breakfast was over the next morning Master Lirriper started with the two boys, and they had but just entered Chepeside when they saw two young men approaching.

"Why, Lionel, here is Francis Vere!" Geoffrey exclaimed. "I thought he was across in Holland with the Earl of Leicester." They doffed their caps. Captain Vere, for such was now his rank, looked at them in surprise.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "here are Mr. Vickars' two sons. How came you here, lads? Have you run away from home to see the wonders of London, or to list as volunteers for the campaigns against the Dons?"

"I wish we were, Mr. Francis," Geoffrey said. "You promised when you were at Hedingham a year and a half since that you would some day take us to the wars with you, and our father, seeing that neither of us have a mind to enter the church, has quite consented that we shall become soldiers, the more so as there is a prospect of fighting for the persecuted Protestants of Holland. And oh, Mr. Francis, could it be now? You know we daily exercise with arms at the castle, and we are both strong and sturdy for our age, and believe me you should not see us flinch

before the Spaniards however many of them there were."

"Tut, tut!" Captain Vere laughed. "Here are young cockerels, Allen; what think you of these for soldiers to stand against the Spanish pikemen?"

"There are many of the volunteers who are not very much older than they are," Captain Allen replied.

"There are two in my company who must be between seventeen and eighteen."

"Ah! but these boys are three years younger than that."

"Would you not take us as your pages, Mr. Francis?" Lionel urged. "We would do faithful service, and then when we come of age that you could enter us as volunteers we should already have learnt a little of war."

"Well, well, I cannot stop to talk to you now, for I am on my way to the Tower on business. I am only over from Holland for a day or two with despatches from the Earl to Her Majesty's Council, and am lodging at Westminster in a house that faces the abbey. It is one of my cousin Edward's houses, and you will see the Vere cognizance over the door. Call there at one hour after noon, and I will have a talk with you; but do not buoy yourselves up with hopes as to your going with me." So saying, with a friendly nod of his head Francis Vere continued his way eastward.

"What think you, Allen?" he asked his comrade as they went along. "I should like to take the lads with me if I could. Their father, who is the rector of Hedingham, taught my cousin Edward

as well as my brothers and myself. I saw a good deal of the boys when I was at home. They are sturdy young fellows, and used to practise daily, as we did at their age, with the men-at-arms at the castle, and can use their weapons. A couple of years of apprenticeship would be good schooling for them. One cannot begin to learn the art of war too young, and it is because we have all been so ignorant of it that our volunteers in Holland have not done better."

"I think, Vere, that they are too young yet to be enlisted as volunteers, although in another two years, perhaps, you might admit the elder of the two; but I see no reason why, if you are so inclined, you should not take them with you as pages. Each company has its pages and boys, and you might take these two for the special service of yourself and your officers. They would then be on pretty well the same footing as the five gentlemen volunteers you have already with you, and would be distinct from the lads who have entered as pages to the company. I suppose that you have not yet your full number of boys?"

"No; there are fifteen boys allowed, one to each ten men, and I am several short of this number, and have already written my brother John to get six sturdy lads from among our own tenantry and to send them over in the first ship from Harwich. Yes, I will take these lads with me. I like their spirit, and we are all fond of their father, who is a very kindly as well as a learned man."

"I don't suppose he will thank you greatly, Francis," Captain Allen laughed.

"His goodwife is more likely to be vexed than he is," Captain Vere said, "for it will give him all the more time for the studies in which he is wrapped up. Besides, it will be a real service to the boys. It will shorten their probation as volunteers, and they may get commissions much earlier than they otherwise would do. We are all mere children in the art of war; for truly before Roger Morgan first took out his volunteers to fight for the Dutch there was scarce a man in England who knew how to range a company in order. You and I learned somewhat of our business in Poland, and some of our leaders have also had a few lessons in the art of war in foreign countries, but most of our officers are altogether new to the work. However, we have good masters, and I trust these Spaniards may teach us how to beat them in time; but at present, as I said, we are all going to school, and the earlier one begins at school the sooner one learns its lessons. Besides, we must have pages, and it will be more pleasant for me having lads who belong in a sort of way of our family, and to whom, if I am disposed, I can talk of people at home. They are high spirited and full of fun, and I should like to have them about me. But here we are at the Tower. We shall not be long, I hope, over the list of arms and munitions that the earl has sent for. When we have done we will take boat back to Westminster. Half an hour will take us there, as the tide will be with us."

CHAPTER III
IN THE LOW COUNTRY

Master Lirriper had stood apart while the boys were conversing with Francis Vere.

"What do you think, Master Lirriper?" Geoffrey exclaimed as they joined him. "We have asked Mr. Vere to take us with him as pages to the war in the Low Country, and though he said we were not to be hopeful about his reply, I do think he will take us. We are to go round to Westminster at one o'clock to see him again. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know what to think, Master Geoffrey. It takes me all by surprise, and I don't know how I stand in the matter. You see, your father gave you into my charge, and what could I say to him if I went back empty handed?"

"But, you see, it is with Francis Vere," Geoffrey said. "If it had been with anyone else it would be different. But the Veres are his patrons, and he looks upon the earl, and Mr. Francis and his brothers, almost as he does on us; and, you know, he has already consented to our entering the army some day. Besides, he can't blame you; because, of course, Mr. Vere will write to him himself and say that he has taken us, and so you can't be blamed in the matter. My father would know well enough that you could not withstand the wishes of one of the Veres, who are

lords of Hedingham and all the country round."

"I should withstand them if I thought they were wrong," the boatman said sturdily, "and if I were sure that your father would object to your going; but that is what I am not sure. He may think it the best thing for you to begin early under the protection of Master Francis, and again he may think you a great deal too young for such wild work. He has certainly always let you have pretty much your own way, and has allowed you to come and go as you like, but this is a different business altogether. I am sorely bested as to what I ought to do."

"Well, nothing is settled yet, Master Lirriper; and, besides, I don't see that you can help yourself in the matter, and if Mr. Vere says he will take us I suppose you can't carry us off by force."

"It is Mistress Vickars that I am thinking of more than your father. The vicar is an easygoing gentleman, but Mistress Vickars speaks her mind, and I expect she will be in a terrible taking over it, and will rate me soundly; though, as you say, I do not see how I can help myself in the matter. Well now, let us look at the shops and at the Guildhall, and then we will make our way down to Westminster as we had proposed to do and see the abbey; by that time it will be near the hour at which you are to call upon Mr. Vere."

But the sights that the boys had been so longing to see had for the time lost their interest in their eyes. The idea that it was possible that Mr. Vere would take them with him to fight against the cruel oppressors of the Low Country was so absorbing

that they could think of nothing else. Even the wonders of the Guildhall and St. Paul's received but scant attention, and the armourers' shops, in which they had a new and lively interest, alone sufficed to detain them. Even the gibes of the apprentices fell dead upon their ears. These varlets might laugh, but what would they say if they knew that they were going to fight the Spaniards? The thought so altered them that they felt almost a feeling of pity for these lads, condemned to stay at home and mind their masters' shops.

As to John Lirriper, he was sorely troubled in his mind, and divided between what he considered his duty to the vicar and his life long respect and reverence towards the lords of Hedingham. The feudal system was extinct, but feudal ideas still lingered among the people. Their lords could no longer summon them to take the field, had no longer power almost of life and death over them, but they were still their lords, and regarded with the highest respect and reverence. The earls of Oxford were, in the eyes of the people of those parts of Essex where their estates lay, personages of greater importance than the queen herself, of whose power and attributes they had but a very dim notion. It was not so very long since people had risen in rebellion against the queen, but such an idea as that of rising against their lords had never entered the mind of a single inhabitant of Hedingham.

However, Master Lirriper came to the conclusion that he was, as Geoffrey had said, powerless to interfere. If Mr. Francis Vere decided to take the boys with him, what could he do to prevent

it? He could hardly take them forcibly down to the boat against their will, and even could he do so their father might not approve, and doubtless the earl, when he came to hear of it, would be seriously angry at this act of defiance of his kinsman. Still, he was sure that he should have a very unpleasant time with Mistress Vickars. But, as he reassured himself, it was, after all, better to put up with a woman's scolding than to bear the displeasure of the Earl of Oxford, who could turn him out of his house, ruin his business, and drive him from Hedingham. After all, it was natural that these lads should like to embark on this adventure with Mr. Francis Vere, and it would doubtless be to their interest to be thus closely connected with him. At any rate, if it was to be it was, and he, John Lirriper, could do nothing to prevent it. Having arrived at this conclusion he decided to make the best of it, and began to chat cheerfully with the boys.

Precisely at the appointed hour John Lirriper arrived with the two lads at the entrance to the house facing the abbey. Two or three servitors, whose doublets were embroidered with the cognizance of the Veres, were standing in front of the door.

"Why, it is Master Lirriper!" one of them said. "Why, what has brought you here? I did not know that your trips often extended to London."

"Nor do they," John Lirriper said. "It was the wind and my nephew's craft the Susan that brought me to London, and it is the will of Mr. Francis that these two young gentlemen should meet him here at one o'clock that has brought me to this door."

"Captain Francis is in; for, you know, he is a captain now, having been lately appointed to a company in the Earl of Leicester's army. He returned an hour since, and has but now finished his meal. Do you wish to go up with these young masters, or shall I conduct them to him?"

"You had best do that," John Lirriper answered. "I will remain here below if Captain Francis desires to see me or has any missive to intrust to me."

The boys followed the servant upstairs, and were shown into a room where Francis Vere, his cousin the Earl of Oxford, and Captain Allen were seated at table.

"Well, lads," the earl said, "so you want to follow my cousin Francis to the wars?"

"That is our wish, my lord, if Captain Francis will be so good as to take us with him."

"And what will my good tutor your father say to it?" the earl asked smiling.

"I think, my lord," Geoffrey said boldly, "that if you yourself will tell my father you think it is for our good, he will say naught against it."

"Oh, you want to throw the responsibility upon me, and to embroil me with your father and Mistress Vickars as an abettor of my cousin Francis in the kidnapping of children? Well, Francis, you had better explain to them what their duties will be if they go with you.

"You will be my pages," Francis Vere said, "and will perform

the usual duties of pages in good families when in the field. It is the duty of pages to aid in collecting firewood and forage, and in all other ways to make themselves useful. You will bear the same sort of relation to the gentlemen volunteers as they do towards the officers. They are aspirants for commissions as officers as you will be to become gentlemen volunteers. You must not think that your duties will be light, for they will not, and you will have to bear many discomforts and hardships. But you will be in an altogether different position from that of the boys who are the pages of the company. You will, apart from your duties, and bearing in mind the difference of your age, associate with the officers and the gentlemen volunteers on terms of equality when not engaged upon duty. On duty you will have to render the same strict and unquestionable obedience that all soldiers pay to those of superior rank. What say you? Are you still anxious to go? Because, if so, I have decided to take you."

Geoffrey and Lionel both expressed their thanks in proper terms, and their earnest desire to accompany Captain Vere, and to behave in all ways conformably to his orders and instructions.

"Very well, that is settled," Francis Vere said. "The earl is journeying down to Hedingham tomorrow, and has kindly promised to take charge of a letter from me to your father, and personally to assure him that this early embarkation upon military life would prove greatly to your advantage."

"Supposing that you are not killed by the Spaniards or carried off by fever," the earl put in; "for although possibly that might

be an advantage to humanity in general, it could scarcely be considered one to you personally."

"We are ready to take our risk of that, my lord," Geoffrey said; "and are indeed greatly beholden both to Captain Francis for his goodness in taking us with him, and to yourself in kindly undertaking the mission of reconciling our father to our departure."

"You have not told me yet how it is that I find you in London?" Francis Vere said.

"We only came up for a week, sir, to see the town. We are in charge of Master Lirriper, who owns a barge on the river, and plies between Hedingham and Bricklesey, but who was coming up to London in a craft belonging to his nephew, and who took charge of us. We are staying at the house of Master Swindon, a citizen and ship chandler."

"Is Master Lirriper below?"

"He is, sir."

"Then in that case he had better go back to the house and bring your mails here. I shall sail from Deptford the day after tomorrow with the turn of tide. You had best remain here now. There will be many things necessary for you to get before you start. I will give instructions to one of my men-at-arms to go with you to purchase them."

"I will take their outfit upon myself, Francis," the earl said. "My steward shall go out with them and see to it. It is the least I can do when I am abetting you in depriving my old tutor of

his sons."

He touched a bell and a servitor entered. "See that these young gentlemen are fed and attended to. They will remain here for the night. Tell Master Dotterell to come hither to me."

The boys bowed deeply and retired.

"It is all settled, Master Lirriper," they said when they reached the hall below. "We are to sail with Captain Francis the day after tomorrow, and you will be pleased to hear that the earl himself has taken charge of the matter, and will see our father and communicate the news to him."

"That is a comfort indeed," John Lirriper said fervently; "for I would most as soon have had to tell him that the Susan had gone down and that you were both drowned, as that I had let you both slip away to the wars when he had given you into my charge. But if the earl takes the matter in hand I do not think that even your lady mother can bear very heavily on me. And now, what is going to be done?"

"We are to remain here in order that suitable clothes may be obtained for us by the time we sail. Will you bring down tomorrow morning our wallets from Master Swindon's, and thank him and his good dame for their hospitality, and say that we are sorry to leave them thus suddenly without having an opportunity of thanking them ourselves? We will write letters tonight to our father and mother, and give them to you to take with you when you return."

John Lirriper at once took his departure, greatly relieved in

mind to find that the earl himself had taken the responsibility upon his shoulders, and would break the news long before he himself reached Hedingham. A few minutes later a servitor conducted the boys to an apartment where a meal was laid for them; and as soon as this was over they were joined by the steward, who requested them to set out with him at once, as there were many things to be done and but short time for doing them. No difficulty in the way of time was, however, thrown in the way by the various tradesmen they visited, these being all perfectly ready to put themselves to inconvenience to do pleasure to so valuable a patron as the powerful Earl of Oxford.

Three suits of clothes were ordered for each of them: the one such as that worn by pages in noble families upon ordinary occasions, another of a much richer kind for special ceremonies and gaieties, the third a strong, serviceable suit for use when actually in the field. Then they were taken to an armourer's where each was provided with a light morion or head piece, breast plate and back piece, sword and dagger. A sufficient supply of under garments, boots, and other necessaries were also purchased; and when all was complete they returned highly delighted to the house. It was still scarce five o'clock, and they went across to the abbey and wandered for some time through its aisles, greatly impressed with its dignity and beauty now that their own affairs were off their mind.

They returned to the house again, and after supper wrote their letters to their father and mother, saying that they hoped they

would not be displeased at the step they had taken, and which they would not have ventured upon had they not already obtained their father's consent to their entering the army. They knew, of course, that he had not contemplated their doing so for some little time; but as so excellent an opportunity had offered, and above all, as they were going out to fight against the Spaniards for the oppressed people of the Low Countries, they hoped their parents would approve of the steps they had taken, not having had time or opportunity to consult them.

At noon two days later Francis Vere with Captain Allen and the two boys took their seats in the stern of a skiff manned by six rowers. In the bow were the servitors of the two officers, and the luggage was stowed in the extreme stern.

"The tide is getting slack, is it not?" Captain Vere asked the boatmen.

"Yes, sir; it will not run up much longer. It will be pretty well slack water by the time we get to the bridge."

Keeping close to the bank the boat proceeded at a rapid pace. Several times the two young officers stood up and exchanged salutations with ladies or gentlemen of their acquaintance. As the boatman had anticipated, tide was slack by the time they arrived at London Bridge, and they now steered out into the middle of the river.

"Give way, lads," Captain Allen said. "We told the captain we would not keep him waiting long after high water, and he will be getting impatient if he does not see us before long."

As they shot past the Susan the boys waved their hands to Master Lirriper, who, after coming down in the morning and receiving their letters for their parents, had returned at once to the city and had taken his place on board the Susan, so as to be able to tell their father that he had seen the last of them. The distance between London Bridge and Deptford was traversed in a very short time. A vessel with her flags flying and her canvas already loosened was hanging to a buoy some distance out in the stream, and as the boat came near enough for the captain to distinguish those on board, the mooring rope was slipped, the head sails flattened in, and the vessel began to swing round. Before her head was down stream the boat was alongside. The two officers followed by the boys ascended the ladder by the side. The luggage was quickly handed up, and the servitors followed. The sails were sheeted home, and the vessel began to move rapidly through the water.

The boys had thought the Susan an imposing craft, but they were surprised, indeed, at the space on board the Dover Castle. In the stern there was a lofty poop with spacious cabins. Six guns were ranged along on each side of the deck, and when the sails were got up they seemed so vast to the boys that they felt a sense of littleness on board the great craft. They had been relieved to find that Captain Vere had his own servitor with him; for in talking it over they had mutually expressed their doubt as to their ability to render such service as Captain Vere would be accustomed to.

The wind was from the southwest, and the vessel was off Sheerness before the tide turned. There was, however, no occasion to anchor, for the wind was strong enough to take them against the flood.

During the voyage they had no duties to perform. The ship's cook prepared the meals, and the officers' servants waited on them, the lads taking their meals with the two officers. Their destination was Bergen op Zoom, a town at the mouth of the Scheldt, of the garrison of which the companies of both Francis Vere and Captain Allen formed a part.

As soon as the low coasts of Holland came in sight the boys watched them with the most lively interest.

"We are passing Sluys now," Captain Vere said. "The land almost ahead of us is Walcheren; and that spire belongs to Flushing. We could go outside and up the channel between the island and Beveland, and then up the Eastern Scheldt to Bergen op Zoom; but instead of that we shall follow the western channel, which is more direct."

"It is as flat as our Essex coast," Geoffrey remarked.

"Aye, and flatter; for the greater part of the land lies below the level of the sea, which is only kept out by great dams and dykes. At times when the rivers are high and the wind keeps back their waters they burst the dams and spread over a vast extent of country. The Zuider Zee was so formed in 1170 and 1395, and covers a tract as large as the whole county of Essex. Twenty-six years later the river Maas broke its banks and flooded a wide

district. Seventy-two villages were destroyed and 100,000 people lost their life. The lands have never been recovered; and where a fertile country once stood is now a mere swamp."

"I shouldn't like living there," Lionel said. "It would be terrible, every time the rivers are full and the wind blows, to think that at any moment the banks may burst and the flood come rushing over you."

"It is all habit," Captain Vere replied; "I don't suppose they trouble themselves about it. But they are very particular in keeping their dykes in good repair. The water is one of the great defences of their country. In the first place there are innumerable streams to be crossed by an invader, and in the second, they can as a last resource cut the dykes and flood the country. These Dutchmen, as far as I have seen of them, are hard working and industrious people, steady and patient, and resolved to defend their independence to the last. This they have indeed proved by the wonderful resistance they have made against the power of Spain. There, you see the ship's head has been turned and we shall before long be in the channel. Sluys lies up that channel on the right. It is an important place. Large vessels can go no further, but are unloaded there and the cargoes taken to Bruges and thence distributed to many other towns. They say that in 1468 as many as a hundred and fifty ships a day arrived at Sluys. That gives you an idea of the trade that the Netherlands carry on. The commerce of this one town was as great as is that of London at the present time. But since the troubles the trade of Sluys has

fallen off a good deal."

The ship had to anchor here for two or three hours until the tide turned, for the wind had fallen very light and they could not make head against the ebb. As soon as it turned they again proceeded on their way, dropping quietly up with the tide. The boys climbed up into the tops, and thence could see a wide extent of country dotted with villages stretching beyond the banks, which restricted their view from the decks. In five hours Bergen op Zoom came in sight, and they presently dropped anchor opposite the town. The boat was lowered, and the two officers with the lads were rowed ashore. They were met as they landed by several young officers.

"Welcome back, Vere; welcome, Allen. You have been lucky indeed in having a few days in England, and getting a view of something besides this dreary flat country and its sluggish rivers. What is the last news from London?"

"There is little news enough," Vere replied. "We were only four days in London, and were busy all the time. And how are things here? Now that summer is at hand and the country drying the Dons ought to be bestirring themselves."

"They say that they are doing so," the officer replied. "We have news that the Duke of Parma is assembling his army at Bruges, where he is collecting the pick of the Spanish infantry with a number of Italian regiments which have joined him. He sent off the Marquess Del Vasto with the Sieur De Hautepenne towards Bois le Duc. General Count Hohenlohe, who, as you

know, we English always call Count Holland, went off with a large force to meet him, and we heard only this morning that a battle has been fought, Hautepenne killed, and the fort of Crevecoeur on the Maas captured. From what I hear, some of our leaders think that it was a mistake so to scatter our forces, and if Parma moves forward from Bruges against Sluys, which is likely enough, we shall be sorely put to it to save the place."

As they were talking they proceeded into the town, and presently reached the house where Francis Vere had his quarters. The officers and gentlemen volunteers of his company soon assembled, and Captain Vere introduced the two boys to them.

"They are young gentlemen of good family," he said, "who will act as my pages until they are old enough to be enrolled as gentlemen volunteers. I commend them to your good offices. Their father is a learned and reverend gentleman who was my tutor, and also tutor to my cousin, the Earl of Oxford, by whom he is greatly valued. They are lads of spirit, and have been instructed in the use of arms at Hedingham as if they had been members of our family. I am sure, gentlemen volunteers, that you will receive them as friends. I propose that they shall take their meals with you, but of course they will lodge here with me and my officers; but as you are in the next house this will cause no inconvenience. I trust that we shall not remain here long, but shall soon be on the move. We have now been here seven months, and it is high time we were doing something. We didn't bargain to come over here and settle down for life in a dull Dutch town."

In a few hours the boys found themselves quite at home in their new quarters. The gentlemen volunteers received them cordially, and they found that for the present their duties would be extremely light, consisting chiefly in carrying messages and orders; for as the officers had all servants of their own, Captain Vere dispensed with their attendance at meals. There was much to amuse and interest them in Bergen op Zoom. It reminded them to some extent of Harwich, with its narrow streets and quaint houses; but the fortifications were far stronger, and the number of churches struck them as prodigious. The population differed in no very large degree in dress from that of England, but the people struck them as being slower and more deliberate in their motion. The women's costumes differed much more widely from those to which they were accustomed, and their strange and varied headdresses, their bright coloured handkerchiefs, and the amount of gold necklaces and bracelets that they wore, struck them with surprise.

Their stay in Bergen op Zoom was even shorter than they had anticipated, for three days after their arrival a boat came with a letter from Sir William Russell, the governor at Flushing. He said that he had just received an urgent letter from the Dutch governor of Sluys, saying that Patina's army was advancing from Bruges towards the city, and had seized and garrisoned the fort of Blankenburg on the sea coast to prevent reinforcements arriving from Ostend; he therefore prayed the governor of Flushing to send off troops and provisions with all haste to enable him to

resist the attack. Sir William requested that the governor of Bergen op Zoom would at once embark the greater portion of his force on board ship and send them to Sluys. He himself was having a vessel filled with grain for the use of the inhabitants, and was also sending every man he could spare from Flushing.

In a few minutes all was bustle in the town. The trumpets of the various companies called the soldiers to arms, and in a very short time the troops were on their way towards the river. Here several ships had been requisitioned for the service; and as the companies marched down they were conducted to the ships to which they were allotted by the quartermasters.

Geoffrey and Lionel felt no small pride as they marched down with their troop. They had for the first time donned their steel caps, breast and back pieces; but this was rather for convenience of carriage than for any present utility. They had at Captain Vere's orders left their ordinary clothes behind them, and were now attired in thick serviceable jerkins, with skirts coming down nearly to the knee, like those worn by the troops. They marched at the rear of the company, the other pages, similarly attired, following them.

As soon as the troops were on board ship, sail was made, and the vessels dropped down the stream. The wind was very light, and it was not until thirty hours after starting that the little fleet arrived off Sluys. The town, which was nearly egg shaped, lay close to the river, which was called the Zwin. At the eastern end, in the centre of a detached piece of water, stood the castle,

connected with the town by a bridge of boats. The Zwin formed the defence on the north side while the south and west were covered by a very wide moat, along the centre of which ran a dyke, dividing it into two channels. On the west side this moat extended to the Zwin, and was crossed at the point of junction by the bridge leading to the west gate.

The walls inclosed a considerable space, containing fields and gardens. Seven windmills stood on the ramparts. The tower of the town hall, and those of the churches of Our Lady, St. John, and the Grey Friars rose high above the town.

The ships from Flushing and Bergen op Zoom sailed up together, and the 800 men who landed were received with immense enthusiasm by the inhabitants, who were Protestants, and devoted to the cause of independence. The English were under the command of Sir Roger Williams, who had already seen so many years of service in the Low Countries; and under him were Morgan, Thomas Baskerville, and Huntley, who had long served with him.

Roger Williams was an admirable man for service of this kind. He had distinguished himself by many deeds of reckless bravery. He possessed an inexhaustible fund of confidence and high spirits, and in his company it was impossible to feel despondent, however desperate the situation.

The citizens placed their houses at the disposal of their new allies, handsome quarters were allotted to the officers, and the soldiers were all housed in private dwellings or the warehouses of

the merchants. The inhabitants had already for some days been working hard at their defences, and the English at once joined them in their labours, strengthening the weak portions of the walls, mounting cannon upon the towers, and preparing in all ways to give a warm reception to the Spaniards.

Captain Vere, his lieutenant and ensign and his two pages, were quartered in the house of a wealthy merchant, whose family did all in their power to make them comfortable. It was a grand old house, and the boys, accustomed as they were to the splendours of Hedingham Castle, agreed that the simple merchants of the Low Countries were far in advance of English nobles in the comforts and conveniences of their dwellings. The walls of the rooms were all heavily panelled; rich curtains hung before the casements. The furniture was not only richly carved, but comfortable. Heavy hangings before the doors excluded draughts, and in the principal apartments Eastern carpets covered the floors. The meals were served on spotless white linen. Rich plates stood on the sideboard, and gold and silver vessels of rare carved work from Italy glittered in the armoires.

Above all, from top to bottom, the house was scrupulously clean. Nor a particle of dust dimmed the brightness of the furniture, and even now, when the city was threatened with siege, the merchant's wife never relaxed her vigilance over the doings of her maids, who seemed to the boys to be perpetually engaged in scrubbing, dusting, and polishing.

"Our mother prides herself on the neatness of her house,"

Geoffrey said; "but what would she say, I wonder, were she to see one of these Dutch households? I fear that the maids would have a hard time of it afterwards, and our father would be fairly driven out of his library."

"It is all very well to be clean," Lionel said; "but I think they carry it too far here. Peace and quietness count for something, and it doesn't seem to me that Dutchmen, fond of it as they say they are, know even the meaning of the words as far as their homes are concerned. Why, it always seems to be cleaning day, and they must be afraid of going into their own houses with their boots on!"

"Yes, I felt quite like a criminal today," Geoffrey laughed, "when I came in muddy up to the waist, after working down there by the sluices. I believe when the Spaniards open fire these people will be more distracted by the dust caused by falling tiles and chimneys than by any danger of their lives."

Great difficulties beset the Duke of Parma at the commencement of the siege. Sluys was built upon the only piece of solid ground in the district, and it was surrounded by such a labyrinth of canals, ditches, and swamps, that it was said that it was almost as difficult to find Sluys as it was to capture it. Consequently, it was impossible to find ground solid enough for a camp to be pitched upon, and the first labour was the erection of wooden huts for the troops upon piles driven into the ground. These huts were protected from the fire of the defenders by bags of earth brought in boats from a long distance. The main

point selected for the attack was the western gate; but batteries were also placed to play upon the castle and the bridge of boats connecting it with the town.

"There is one advantage in their determining to attack us at the western extremity of the town," John Menyn, the merchant at whose house Captain Vere and his party were lodging, remarked when his guest informed him there was no longer any doubt as to the point at which the Spaniards intended to attack, "for they will not be able to blow up our walls with mines in that quarter."

"How is that?" Francis Vere asked.

"If you can spare half an hour of your time I will show you," the merchant said.

"I can spare it now, Von Menyn," Vere replied; "for the information is important, whatever it may be."

"I will conduct you there at once. There is no time like the present."

"Shall we follow you, sir?" Geoffrey asked his captain.

"Yes, come along," Vere replied. "The matter is of interest, and for the life of me I cannot make out what this obstacle can be of which our host speaks."

They at once set out.

John Menyn led them to a warehouse close to the western wall, and spoke a few words to its owner, who at once took three lanterns from the wall and lighted them, handing one to Vere, another to John Menyn, and taking the other himself; he then unlocked a massive door. A flight of steps leading apparently to a

cellar were visible. He led the way down, the two men following, and the boys bringing up the rear. The descent was far deeper than they had expected, and when they reached the bottom they found themselves in a vast arched cellar filled with barrels. From this they proceeded into another, and again into a third.

"What are these great magazines?" Francis Vere asked in surprise.

"They are wine cellars, and there are scores similar to those you see. Sluys is the centre of the wine trade of Flanders and Holland, and cellars like these extend right under the wall. All the warehouses along here have similar cellars. This end of the town was the driest, and the soil most easily excavated. That is why the magazines for wines are all clustered here. There is not a foot of ground behind and under the walls at this end that is not similarly occupied, and if the Spaniards try to drive mines to blow up the walls, they will simply break their way into these cellars, where we can meet them and drive them back again."

"Excellent!" Francis Vere said. "This will relieve us of the work of countermining, which is always tiresome and dangerous, and would be specially so here, where we should have to dive under that deep moat outside your walls. Now we shall only have to keep a few men on watch in these cellars. They would hear the sound of the Spanish approaching, and we shall be ready to give them a warm reception by the time they break in. Are there communications between these cellars?"

"Well, I am much obliged to you for telling me of this,"

Captain Vere said. "Williams and Morgan will be glad enough to hear that there is no fear of their being blown suddenly into the air while defending the walls, and they will see the importance of keeping a few trusty men on watch in the cellars nearest to the Spaniards. I shall report the matter to them at once. The difficulty," he added smiling, "will be to keep the men wakeful, for it seems to me that the very air is heavy with the fumes of wine."

"Yes, for the most part," the wine merchant said. "The cellars are not entirely the property of us dealers in wine. They are constructed by men who let them, just as they would let houses. A merchant in a small way would need but one cellar, while some of us occupy twenty or more; therefore, there are for the most part communications, with doors, between the various cellars, so that they can be let off in accordance with the needs of the hirers."

CHAPTER IV
THE SIEGE OF SLUYS

Until the Spaniards had established their camp, and planted some of their batteries, there was but little firing. Occasionally the wall pieces opened upon parties of officers reconnoitring, and a few shots were fired from time to time to harass the workmen in the enemy's batteries; but this was done rather to animate the townsmen, and as a signal to distant friends that so far matters were going on quietly, than with any hopes of arresting the progress of the enemy's works. Many sorties were made by the garrison, and fierce fighting took place, but only a score or two of men from each company were taken upon these occasions, and the boys were compelled to remain inactive spectators of the fight.

In these sorties the Spanish works were frequently held for a few minutes, gabions thrown down, and guns overturned, but after doing as much damage as they could the assailants had to fall back again to the town, being unable to resist the masses of pikemen brought up against them. The boldness of these sorties, and the bravery displayed by their English allies, greatly raised the spirits of the townsfolk, who now organized themselves into companies, and undertook the work of guarding the less exposed portion of the wall, thus enabling the garrison to keep their whole

strength at the points attacked. The townsmen also laboured steadily in adding to the defenses; and two companies of women were formed, under female captains, who took the names of May in the Heart and Catherine the Rose. These did good service by building a strong fort at one of the threatened points, and this work was in their honour christened Fort Venus.

"It is scarcely a compliment to Venus," Geoffrey laughed to his brother. "These square shouldered and heavily built women do not at all correspond with my idea of the goddess of love."

"They are strong enough for men," Lionel said. "I shouldn't like one of those big fat arms to come down upon my head. No, they are not pretty; but they look jolly and good tempered, and if they were to fight as hard as they work they ought to do good service."

"There is a good deal of difference between them," Geoffrey said. "Look at those three dark haired women with neat trim figures. They do not look as if they belonged to the same race as the others."

"They are not of the same race, lad," Captain Vere, who was standing close by, said. "The big heavy women are Flemish, the others come, no doubt, from the Walloon provinces bordering on France. The Walloons broke off from the rest of the states and joined the Spanish almost from the first. They were for the most part Catholics, and had little in common with the people of the Low Country; but there were, of course, many Protestants among them, and these were forced to emigrate, for the Spanish allow

no Protestants in the country under their rule. Alva adopted the short and easy plan of murdering all the Protestants in the towns he took; but the war is now conducted on rather more humane principles, and the Protestants have the option given them of changing their faith or leaving the country.

"In this way, without intending it, the Spaniards have done good service to Holland, for hundreds of thousands of industrious people have flocked there for shelter from Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, and other cities that have fallen into the hands of the Spaniards, thus greatly raising the population of Holland, and adding to its power of defence. Besides this, the presence of these exiles, and the knowledge that a similar fate awaits themselves if they fall again under the yoke of Spain, nerves the people to resist to the utmost. Had it not been for the bigotry of the Spanish, and the abominable cruelties practised by the Inquisition, the States would never have rebelled; and even after they did so, terms might easily have been made with them had they not been maddened by the wholesale massacres perpetrated by Alva. There, do you hear those women speaking? Their language is French rather than Flemish."

Just as they were speaking a heavy roar of cannon broke out from the eastern end of the town.

"They have opened fire on the castle!" Vere exclaimed. "Run, lads, quick! and summon the company to form in the marketplace in front of our house. We are told off to reinforce the garrison of the castle in case of attack."

The boys hurried away at the top of their speed. They had the list of all the houses in which the men of the company were quartered; and as the heavy roar of cannon had brought every one to their doors to hear what was going on, the company were in a very short time assembled.

Francis Vere placed himself at their head, and marched them through the long streets of the town and out through the wall on to the bridge of boats. It was the first time the boys had been under fire; and although they kept a good countenance, they acknowledged to each other afterwards that they had felt extremely uncomfortable as they traversed the bridge with the balls whistling over their heads, and sometimes striking the water close by and sending a shower of spray over the troops.

They felt easier when they entered the castle and were protected by its walls. Upon these the men took their station. Those with guns discharged their pieces against the Spanish artillerymen, the pikemen assisted the bombardiers to work the cannon, and the officers went to and fro encouraging the men. The pages of the company had little to do beyond from time to time carrying cans of wine and water to the men engaged. Geoffrey and Lionel, finding that their services were not required by Captain Vere, mounted on to the wall, and sheltering themselves as well as they could behind the battlements, looked out at what was going on.

"It doesn't seem to me," Geoffrey said, "that these walls will long withstand the balls of the Spanish. The battlements are

already knocked down in several places, and I can hear after each shot strikes the walls the splashing of the brickwork as it falls into the water. See! there is Tom Carroll struck down with a ball. It's our duty to carry him away."

They ran along the wall to the fallen soldier. Two other pages came up, and the four carried him to the top of the steps and then down into the courtyard, where a Dutch surgeon took charge of him. His shoulder had been struck by the ball, and the arm hung only by a shred of flesh. The surgeon shook his head.

"I can do nothing for him," he said. "He cannot live many hours."

Lionel had done his share in carrying the man down but he now turned sick and faint.

Geoffrey caught him by the arm. "Steady, old boy," he said; "it is trying at first, but we shall soon get accustomed to it. Here, take a draught of wine from this flask."

"I am better now," Lionel said, after taking a draught of wine. "I felt as if I was going to faint, Geoffrey. I don't know why I should, for I did not feel frightened when we were on the wall."

"Oh, it has nothing to do with fear; it is just the sight of that poor fellow's blood. There is nothing to be ashamed of in that. Why, I saw Will Atkins, who was one of the best fighters and singlestick players in Hedingham, go off in a dead swoon because a man he was working with crushed his thumb between two heavy stones. Look, Lionel, what cracks there are in the wall here. I don't think it will stand long. We had better run up and

tell Captain Vere, for it may come toppling down with some of the men on it."

Captain Vere on hearing the news ran down and examined the wall.

"Yes," he said, "it is evidently going. A good earthwork is worth a dozen of these walls. They will soon have the castle about our ears. However, it is of no great importance to us. I saw you lads just now on the wall; I did not care about ordering you down at the time; but don't go up again except to help to carry down the wounded. Make it a rule, my boys, never to shirk your duty, however great the risk to life may be; but, on the other hand, never risk your lives unless it is your duty to do so. What is gallantry in the one case is foolishness in the other. Although you are but pages, yet it may well be that in such a siege as this you will have many opportunities of showing that you are of good English stock; but while I would have you shrink from no danger when there is a need for you to expose yourselves, I say also that you should in no way run into danger wantonly."

Several times in the course of the afternoon the boys took their turn in going up and helping to bring down wounded men. As the time went on several yawning gaps appeared in the walls. The courtyard was strewn with fragments of masonry, and the pages were ordered to keep under shelter of the wall of the castle unless summoned on duty. Indeed, the courtyard had now become a more dangerous station than the wall itself; for not only did the cannon shot fly through the breaches, but fragments of bricks,

mortar, and rubbish flew along with a force that would have been fatal to anything struck.

Some of the pages were big fellows of seventeen or eighteen years old, who had been serving for some years under Morgan and Williams, and would soon be transferred into the ranks.

"I like not this sort of fighting," one of them said. "It is all very well when it comes to push of pike with the Spaniards, but to remain here like chickens in a coop while they batter away at us is a game for which I have no fancy. What say you, Master Vickars?"

"Well, it is my first experience, Somers, and I cannot say that it is agreeable. I do not know whether I should like hand to hand fighting better; but it seems to me at present that it would be certainly more agreeable to be doing something than to be sitting here and listening to the falls of the pieces of masonry and the whistling of the balls. I don't see that they will be any nearer when they have knocked this place to pieces. They have no boats, and if they had, the guns on the city wall would prevent their using them; besides, when the bridge of boats is removed they could do nothing if they got here."

Towards evening a council was held, all the principal officers being present, and it was decided to evacuate the castle. It could indeed have been held for some days longer, but it was plain it would at length become untenable; the bridge of boats had already been struck in several places, and some of the barges composing it had sunk level with the water. Were it destroyed,

the garrison of the castle would be completely cut off; and as no great advantage was to be gained by holding the position, for it was evident that it was upon the other end of the town the main attack was to be made, it was decided to evacuate it under cover of night. As soon as it became dark this decision was carried into effect, and for hours the troops worked steadily, transporting the guns, ammunition, and stores of all kinds across from the castle to the town.

Already communication with their friends outside had almost ceased, for the first operation of the enemy had been to block the approach to Sluys from the sea. Floats had been moored head and stern right across Zwin, and a battery erected upon each shore to protect them; but Captains Hart and Allen twice swam down to communicate with friendly vessels below the obstacle, carrying despatches with them from the governor to the States General, and from Roger Williams to the English commanders, urging that no time should be lost in assembling an army to march to the relief of the town.

Both contained assurances that the garrison would defend the place to the last extremity, but pointed out that it was only a question of time, and that the town must fall unless relieved. The Dutch garrison were 800 strong, and had been joined by as many English. Parma had at first marched with but 6000 men against the city, but had very speedily drawn much larger bodies of men towards him, and had, as Roger Williams states in a letter to the queen sent from Sluys at an early period of the siege, four

regiments of Walloons, four of Germans, one of Italians, one of Burgundians, fifty-two companies of Spaniards, twenty-four troops of horse, and forty-eight guns. This would give a total of at least 17,000 men, and further reinforcements afterwards arrived.

Against so overwhelming a force as this, it could not be hoped that the garrison, outnumbered by more than ten to one, could long maintain themselves, and the Duke of Parma looked for an easy conquest of the place. By both parties the possession of Sluys was regarded as a matter of importance out of all proportion to the size and population of the town; for at that time it was known in England that the King of Spain was preparing a vast fleet for the invasion of Britain, and Sluys was the nearest point to our shores at which a fleet could gather and the forces of Parma embark to join those coming direct from Spain. The English, therefore, were determined to maintain the place to the last extremity; and while Parma had considered its capture as an affair of a few days only, the little garrison were determined that for weeks at any rate they would be able to prolong the resistance, feeling sure that before that time could elapse both the States and England, knowing the importance of the struggle, would send forces to their relief.

The view taken as to the uselessness of defending the castle was fully justified, as the Spaniards on the following day removed the guns that they had employed in battering it, to their works facing the western gate, and fire was opened next morning. Under cover of this the Spanish engineers pushed their trenches up to

the very edge of the moat, in spite of several desperate sorties by the garrison. The boys had been forbidden by Captain Vere to take their place with the company on the walls.

"In time," he said, "as our force decreases, we shall want every one capable of handling arms to man the breaches, but at present we are not in any extremity; and none save those whom duty compels to be there must come under the fire of the Spaniards, for to do so would be risking life without gain."

They had, however, made friends with the wine merchant whose cellars they had visited, and obtained permission from him to visit the upper storey of his warehouse whenever they chose. From a window here they were enabled to watch all that was taking place, for the warehouse was much higher than the walls. It was not in the direct line of fire of the Spanish batteries, for these were chiefly concentrated against the wall a little to their right. After heavy fighting the Spaniards one night, by means of boats from the Zwin, landed upon the dyke which divided the moat into two channels, and thus established themselves so close under the ramparts that the guns could not be brought to bear upon them. They proceeded to intrench themselves at once upon the dyke.

The governor, Arnold Groenvelt, consulted with the English leaders, and decided that the enemy must be driven off this dyke immediately, or that the safety of the city would be gravely imperilled. They therefore assembled a force of four hundred men, sallied out of the south gate, where two bastions were

erected on the dyke itself, and then advanced along it to the assault of the Spaniards. The battle was a desperate one, the English and Dutch were aided by their comrades on the wall, who shot with guns and arquebuses against the Spaniards, while the later were similarly assisted by their friends along the outer edge of the moat, and received constant reinforcements by boats from their ships.

The odds were too great for the assailants, who were forced at last to fall back along the dyke to the south gate and to re-enter the town. It was already five weeks since the English had arrived to take part in the defence, and the struggle now began upon a great scale–thirty cannon and eight culverins opening fire upon the walls. The heaviest fire was on St. James' day, the 25th of July, when 4000 shots were fired between three in the morning and five in the afternoon. While this tremendous cannonade was going on, the boys could not but admire the calmness shown by the population. Many of the shots, flying over the top of the walls, struck the houses in the city, and the chimneys, tiles, and masses of masonry fell in the streets. Nevertheless the people continued their usual avocations. The shops were all open, though the men employed served their customers with breast and back pieces buckled on, and their arms close at hand, so that they could run to the walls at once to take part in their defence did the Spaniards attempt an assault upon them. The women stood knitting at their doors, Frau Menyn looked as sharply after her maids as ever, and washing and scouring went on without interruption.

"I believe that woman will keep those girls at work after the Spaniards have entered the city, and until they are thundering at the door," Lionel said. "Who but a Dutch woman would give a thought to a few particles of dust on her furniture when an enemy was cannonading the town?"

"I think she acts wisely after all, Lionel. The fact that everything goes on as usual here and in other houses takes people's thoughts off the dangers of the position, and prevents anything like panic being felt."

The lads spent the greater part of the day at their lookout, and could see that the wall against which the Spanish fire was directed was fast crumbling. Looking down upon it, it seemed deserted of troops, for it would be needlessly exposing the soldiers to death to place them there while the cannonade continued; but behind the wall, and in the street leading to it, companies of English and Dutch soldiers could be seen seated or lying on the ground.

They were leaning out of the dormer window in the high roof watching the Spanish soldiers in the batteries working their guns, when, happening to look round, they saw a crossbow protruded from a window of the warehouse to their right, and a moment afterwards the sharp twang of the bow was heard. There was nothing unusual in this; for although firearms were now generally in use the longbow and the crossbow had not been entirely abandoned, and there were still archers in the English army, and many still held that the bow was a far better weapon than the

arquebus, sending its shafts well nigh as far and with a truer aim.

"If that fellow is noticed," Geoffrey said, "we shall have the Spanish musketeers sending their balls in this direction. The governor has, I heard Captain Vere say, forbidden shooting from the warehouses, because he does not wish to attract the Spanish fire against them. Of course when the wall yields and the breach has to be defended the warehouses will be held, and as the windows will command the breach they will be great aids to us then, and it would be a great disadvantage to us if the Spaniards now were to throw shells and fireballs into these houses, and so to destroy them before they make their attack. Nor can much good be gained, for at this distance a crossbow would scarce carry its bolts beyond the moat."

"Most likely the man is using the crossbow on purpose to avoid attracting the attention of the Spaniards, Geoffrey. At this distance they could not see the crossbow, while a puff of smoke would be sure to catch their eye."

"There, he has shot again. I did not see the quarrel fall in the moat. See, one of the Spanish soldiers from that battery is coming forward. There, he has stooped and picked something up. Hallo! do you see that? He has just raised his arm; that is a signal, surely."

"It certainly looked like it," Lionel agreed. "It was a sort of half wave of the hand. That is very strange!"

"Very, Lionel; it looks to me very suspicious. It is quite possible that a piece of paper may have been tied round the

bolt, and that someone is sending information to the enemy. This ought to be looked to."

"But what are we to do, Geoffrey? Merely seeing a Spanish soldier wave his arm is scarcely reason enough for bringing an accusation against anyone. We are not even sure that he picked up the bolt; and even if he did, the action might have been a sort of mocking wave of the hand at the failure of the shooter to send it as far as the battery."

"It might be, of course, Lionel. No, we have certainly nothing to go upon that would justify our making a report on the subject, but quite enough to induce us to keep a watch on this fellow, whoever he may be. Let us see, to begin with, if he shoots again.

They waited for an hour, but the head of the crossbow was not again thrust out of the window.

"He may have ceased shooting for either of two reasons," Geoffrey said. "If he is a true man, because he sees that his bolts do not carry far enough to be of any use. If he is a traitor, because he has gained his object, and knows that his communication has reached his friends outside. We will go down now and inquire who is the occupier of the next warehouse."

The merchant himself was not below, for as he did business with other towns he had had nothing to do since Sluys was cut off from the surrounded country; but one of his clerks was at work, making out bills and accounts in his office as if the thunder of the guns outside was unheard by him. The boys had often spoken to him as they passed in and out.

"Who occupies the warehouse on the right?" Geoffrey asked him carelessly.

"William Arnig," he replied. "He is a leading citizen, and one of the greatest merchants in our trade. His cellars are the most extensive we have, and he does a great trade in times of peace with Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, and other towns."

"I suppose he is a Protestant like most of the townspeople?" Geoffrey remarked.

"No, he is a Catholic; but he is not one who pushes his opinions strongly, and, he is well disposed to the cause, and a captain in one of the city bands. The Catholics and Protestants always dwell quietly together throughout the Low Countries, and would have no animosities against each other were it not for the Spaniards. Formerly, at least, this was the case; but since the persecutions we have Protestant towns and Catholic towns, the one holding to the States cause, the other siding with the Spaniards. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I hadn't heard the name of your next neighbour, and, was wondering who he might be."

The boys had now been nearly two months in Holland, and were beginning to understand the language, which is not difficult to acquire, and differed then even less than now from the dialect spoken in the eastern counties of England, between whom and Holland there had been for many generations much trade and intimate relations.

"What had we better do next, Geoffrey?" Lionel asked as they

left the warehouse.

"I think that in the first place, Lionel, we will take our post at the window tomorrow, and keep a close watch all day to see whether this shooting is repeated. If it is, we had better report the matter to Captain Vere, and leave him to decide what should be done. I do not see that we could undertake anything alone, and in any case, you see, it would be a serious matter to lay an accusation against a prominent citizen who is actually a captain of one of the bands."

Upon the following day they took their post again at the window, and after some hours watching saw three bolts fired from the next window. Watching intently, they saw the two first fall into the moat. They could not see where the other fell; but as there was no splash in the water, they concluded that it had fallen beyond it, and in a minute they saw a soldier again advance from the battery, pick up something at the edge of the water, raise his arm, and retire. That evening when Captain Vere returned from the ramparts they informed him of what they had observed.

"Doubtless it is an act of treachery," he said, "and this merchant is communicating with the enemy. At the same time what you have seen, although convincing evidence to me, is scarce enough for me to denounce him. Doubtless he does not write these letters until he is ready to fire them off, and were he arrested in his house or on his way to the warehouse we might fail to find proofs of his guilt, and naught but ill feeling would be caused among his friends. No, whatever we do we must do

cautiously. Have you thought of any plan by which we might catch him in the act?"

"If two or three men could be introduced into his warehouse, and concealed in the room from which he fires, they might succeed in catching him in the act, Captain Vere; but the room may be an empty one without any place whatever where they could be hidden, and unless they were actually in the room they would be of little good, for he would have time, if he heard footsteps, to thrust any letter he may have written into his mouth, and so destroy it before it could be seized."

"That is so," Captain Vere agreed. "The matter seems a difficult one, and yet it is of the greatest importance to hinder communications with the Spaniards. Tonight all the soldiers who can be spared, aided by all the citizens able to use mattock and pick, are to set to work to begin to raise a half moon round the windmill behind the point they are attacking, so as to have a second line to fall back upon when the wall gives way, which it will do ere long, for it is sorely shaken and battered. It is most important to keep this from the knowledge of the Spaniards. Now, lads, you have shown your keenness by taking notice of what is going on, see if you cannot go further, and hit upon some plan of catching this traitor at his work. If before night we can think of no scheme, I must go to the governor and tell him frankly that we have suspicions of treachery, though we cannot prove them, and ask him, in order to prevent the possibility of our plans being communicated to the enemy, to place some troops in all

the warehouses along that line, so that none can shoot there from any message to the Spaniards."

Just as Captain Vere finished his supper, the boys came into the room again.

"We have thought of a plan, sir, that might succeed, although it would be somewhat difficult. The dormer window from which these bolts have been fired lies thirty or forty feet away from that from which we were looking. The roof is so steep that no one could hold a footing upon it for a moment, nor could a plank be placed upon which he could walk. The window is about twelve feet from the top of the roof. We think that one standing on the ledge of our window might climb on to its top, and once there swing a rope with a stout grapnel attached to catch on the ridge of the roof; then two or three men might climb up there and work themselves along, and then lower themselves down with a rope on to the top of the next window. They would need to have ropes fastened round their bodies, for the height is great, and a slip would mean death.

"The one farthest out on the window could lean over when he hears a noise below him, and when he saw the crossbow thrust from the window, could by a sudden blow knock it from the fellow's hand, when it would slide down the roof and fall into the narrow yard between the warehouse and the walls. Of course some men would be placed there in readiness to seize it, and others at the door of the warehouse to arrest the traitor if he ran down."

"I think the plan is a good one, though somewhat difficult of execution," Captain Vere said. "But this enterprise on the roof would be a difficult one and dangerous, since as you say a slip would mean death."

"Lionel and myself, sir, would undertake that with the aid of two active men to hold the ropes for us. We have both done plenty of bird nesting in the woods of Hedingham, and are not likely to turn giddy."

"I don't think it is necessary for more than one to get down on to that window," Captain Vere said. "Only one could so place himself as to look down upon the crossbow. However, you shall divide the honour of the enterprise between you. You, as the eldest and strongest, Geoffrey, shall carry out your plan on the roof, while you, Lionel, shall take post at the door with four men to arrest the traitor when he leaves. I will select two strong and active men to accompany you, Geoffrey, and aid you in your attempt; but mind, before you try to get out of the window and to climb on to its roof, have a strong rope fastened round your body and held by the others; then in case of a slip, they can haul you in again. I will see that the ropes and grapnels are in readiness."

The next morning early Geoffrey proceeded with the two men who had been selected to accompany him to his usual lookout. Both were active, wiry men, and entered fully into the spirit of the undertaking when Geoffrey explained its nature to them. They looked out of the dormer window at the sharp roof slanting away in front of them and up to the ridge above.

"I think, Master Vickars," one of them, Roger Browne by name, said, "that I had best go up first. I served for some years at sea, and am used to climbing about in dizzy places. It is no easy matter to get from this window sill astride the roof above us, and moreover I am more like to heave the grapnel so that it will hook firmly on to the ridge than you are."

"Very well, Roger. I should be willing to try, but doubtless you would manage it far better than I should. But before you start we will fasten the other rope round your body, as Captain Vere directed me to do. Then in case you slip, or anything gives way with your weight, we can check you before you slide far down below us."

A rope was accordingly tied round the man's body under his arms. Taking the grapnel, to which the other rope was attached, he got out on to the sill. It was not an easy task to climb up on to the ridge of the dormer window, and it needed all his strength and activity to accomplish the feat. Once astride of the ridge the rest was easy. At the first cast he threw the grapnel so that it caught securely on the top of the roof. After testing it with two or three pulls he clambered up, leaving the lower end of the rope hanging by the side of the window. As soon as he had gained this position Geoffrey, who was to follow him, prepared to start.

According to the instructions Browne had given him he fastened the end of the rope which was round Browne's body under his own shoulders, then leaning over and taking a firm hold of the rope to which the grapnel was attached, he let himself out

of the window. Browne hauled from above at the rope round his body, and he pulled himself with his hands by that attached to the grapnel, and presently reached the top.

"I am glad you came first, Roger," he said. "I do not think I could have ever pulled myself up if you had not assisted me."

He unfastened the rope, and the end was thrown down to the window, and Job Tredgold, the other man, fastened it round him and was hauled up as Geoffrey had been.

"We will move along now to that stack of chimneys coming through the roof four feet below the ridge on the town side," Geoffrey said. "We can stand down there out of sight of the Spaniards. We shall be sure to attract attention sitting up here, and might have some bullets flying round our ears, besides which this fellow's friends might suspect our object and signal to him in some way. It is two hours yet to the time when we have twice seen him send his bolts across the moat."

This was accordingly done, and for an hour and a half they sat down on the roof with their feet against the stack of chimneys.

"It is time to be moving now," Geoffrey said at last. "I think the best way will be for me to get by the side of the dormer window instead of above it. It would be very awkward leaning over there, and I should not have strength to strike a blow; whereas with the rope under my arms and my foot on the edge of the sill, which projects a few inches beyond the side of the window, I could stand upright and strike a downright blow on the crossbow."

"That would be the best way, I think," Roger Browne agreed; "and I will come down on to the top of the window and lean over. In the first place your foot might slip, and as you dangle there by the rope he might cut it and let you shoot over, or he might lean out and shoot you as you climb up the roof again; but if I am above with my pistol in readiness there will be no fear of accidents."

CHAPTER V
AN HEROIC DEFENCE

The plan Roger Browne suggested was carried out. Geoffrey was first lowered to his place by the side of the window, and bracing himself against its side with a foot on the sill he managed to stand upright, leaning against the rope that Job Tredgold held from above. Job had instructions when Geoffrey lifted his arm to ease the rope a few inches so as to enable the lad to lean forward. After two or three attempts Geoffrey got the rope to the exact length which would enable him to look round the corner and to strike a blow with his right hand, in which he held a stout club. Roger Browne then descended by the aid of the other rope, and fastening it round his body lay down astride of the roof of the window with his head and shoulders over the end, and his pistol held in readiness.

It seemed an age to Geoffrey before he heard the sound of a footstep in the loft beside him. He grasped his cudgel firmly and leaned slightly forward. For ten minutes there was quiet within, and Geoffrey guessed that the traitor was writing the missive he was about to send to the enemy; then the footstep approached the window, and a moment later a crossbow was thrust out. A glance at it sufficed to show that the bolt was enveloped in a piece of paper wound round it and secured with a string.

Steadying himself as well as he could Geoffrey struck with all his force down upon the crossbow. The weapon, loosely held, went clattering down the tiles. There was an exclamation of surprise and fury from within the window, and at the same moment Job Tredgold, seeing that Geoffrey's attempt had been successful, hauled away at the rope and began to drag him backward up the tiles.

The lad saw a man lean out of the window and look up at him, then a pistol was levelled; but the report came from above the window, and not from the threatening weapon. A sharp cry of pain was heard, as the pistol fell from the man's hand and followed the crossbow down the roof. A few seconds later Geoffrey was hauled up to the ridge, where he was at once joined by Roger Browne. Shifting the ropes they moved along till above the window from which they had issued. Geoffrey was first lowered down. As soon as he had got in at the window he undid the rope and Job Tredgold followed him, while Roger Browne slid down by the rope attached to the grapnel; then they ran downstairs.

As soon as they sallied out below they saw that Lionel and the men with him had captured a prisoner; and just as they joined the party the guard came round from the other side of the warehouse, bringing with them the crossbow, its bolt, and the pistol. The prisoner, whose shoulder was broken by Roger Browne's shot, was at once taken to Captain Vere's quarters. That officer had just arrived from the walls, knowing the time at which the capture

would probably be made.

"So you have succeeded," he said. "Well done, lads; you have earned the thanks of all. We will take this man at once to the governor, who is at present at the town hall."

By the time they issued out quite a crowd had assembled, for the news that William Von Arnig had been brought a prisoner and wounded to Captain Vere's quarters had spread rapidly. The crowd increased as they went along, and Captain Vere and his party had difficulty in making their way to the town hall, many of the people exclaiming loudly against this treatment of one of the leading citizens. The governor was, when they entered, holding council with the English leader, Sir Roger Williams.

"Why, what is this, Captain Vere?" he asked in surprise as that officer, accompanied by the two boys and followed by Roger Browne and Job Tredgold guarding the prisoner, entered.

"I have to accuse this man of treacherously communicating with the enemy," Francis Vere said.

"What?" Arnold de Groenvelt exclaimed in surprise. "Why, this is Mynheer Von Arnig, one of our most worshipful citizens! Surely, Captain Vere, there must be some error here?"

"I will place my evidence before you," Captain Vere said; "and it will be for you to decide upon it. Master Geoffrey Vickars, please to inform the governor what you know about this matter."

Geoffrey then stated how he and his brother, being at the upper window of the warehouse, had on two days in succession seen a crossbow discharged from a neighbouring window, and

had noticed a Spanish soldier come out of a battery and pick up something which they believed to be the bolt, and how he and his brother had reported the circumstances to Captain Vere. That officer then took up the story, and stated that seeing the evidence was not conclusive, and it was probable that if an attempt was made to arrest the person, whomsoever he might be, who had used the crossbow, any evidence of treasonable design might be destroyed before he was seized, he had accepted the offer of Master Vickars to climb the roof, lower himself to the window from which the bolt would be shot, and, if possible, strike it from the man's hands, so that it would fall down the roof to the courtyard below, where men were placed to seize it.

Geoffrey then related how he, with the two soldiers guarding the prisoner, had scaled the roof and taken a position by the window; how he had seen the crossbow thrust out, and had struck it from the hands of the man holding it; how the latter had leaned out, and would have shot him had not Roger Browne from his post above the window shot him in the shoulder.

"Here are the crossbow and pistol," Captain Vere said; "and this is the bolt as it was picked up by my men. You see, sir, there is a paper fastened round it. I know not its contents, for I judged it best to leave it as it was found until I placed it in your hands."

The governor cut the string, unrolled the paper and examined it. It contained a statement as to the state of the wall, with remarks where it was yielding, and where the enemy had best shoot against it. It said that the defenders had in the night begun

to form a half moon behind it, and contained a sketch showing the exact position of the new work.

"Gentlemen, what think you of this?" the governor asked the English officers.

"There can be no doubt that it is a foul act of treachery," Williams said, "and the traitor merits death."

"We will not decide upon it ourselves," the governor said. "I will summon six of the leading citizens, who shall sit as a jury with us. This is a grave matter, and touches the honour of the citizens as well as the safety of the town."

In a few minutes the six citizens summoned arrived. The evidence was again given, and then the prisoner was asked what he had to say in his defence.

"It is useless for me to deny it," he replied. "I am caught in the act, and must suffer for it. I have done my duty to the King of Spain, my sovereign; and I warn you he will take vengeance for my blood."

"That we must risk," the governor said. "Now, gentlemen, you citizens of this town now attacked by the Spaniards, and you, sir, who are in command of the soldiers of the queen of England, have heard the evidence and the answer the prisoner has made. What is your opinion thereon? Do you, Sir Roger Williams, being highest in rank and authority, first give your opinion."

"I find that he is guilty of an act of gross treason and treachery. For such there is but one punishment–death." And the six citizens all gave the same decision.

"You are found guilty of this foul crime," the governor said, "and are sentenced to death. In half an hour you will be hung in the marketplace, as a punishment to yourself and a warning to other traitors, if such there be in this town of Sluys. As to you, young sirs, you have rendered a great service to the town, and have shown a discernment beyond your years. I thank you in the name of the city and of its garrison, and also in that of the States, whose servant I am."

A guard of armed citizens were now called in, the prisoner was handed to them, and orders given to their officer to carry the sentence into effect. A statement of the crime of the prisoner, with the names of those who had acted as his judges, and the sentence, was then drawn out, signed by the governor, and, ordered by him to be affixed to the door of the town hall. The two lads, finding that they were no longer required, hastened back to their quarters, having no wish to be present at the execution of the unhappy wretch whose crime they had been the means of detecting.

A few days later considerable portions of the battered wall fell, and shortly afterwards a breach of two hundred and fifty paces long was effected, and a bridge of large boats constructed by the enemy from the dyke to the foot of the rampart.

This was not effected without terrible loss. Hundreds of the bravest Spanish soldiers and sailors were killed, and three officers who succeeded each other in command of the attack were badly wounded. The Spanish had laboured under great

difficulties owing to the lack of earth to push their trenches forward to the edge of the moat, arising from the surrounding country being flooded. They only succeeded at last by building wooden machines of bullet proof planks on wheels, behind each of which four men could work. When all was prepared the Spaniards advanced to the attack, rushing up the breach with splendid valour, headed by three of their bravest leaders; but they were met by the English and Dutch, and again and again hurled back.

Day and night the fighting continued, the Spaniards occasionally retiring to allow their artillery to open fire again upon the shattered ruins. But stoutly as the defenders fought, step by step the Spaniards won their way forward until they had captured the breach and the west gate adjoining it, there being nothing now beyond the hastily constructed inner work between them and the town. The finest regiment of the whole of the Spanish infantry now advanced to the assault, but they were met by the defenders–already sadly diminished in numbers, but firm and undaunted as ever,–and their pikes and their axes well supplied the place of the fallen walls.

Assault after assault was met and repulsed, Sir Roger Williams, Thomas Baskerville, and Francis Vere being always in the thick of the fight. Baskerville was distinguished by the white plumes of his helmet, Vere by his crimson mantle; and the valour of these leaders attracted the admiration of the Duke of Parma himself, who watched the fight from the summit of the tower

of the western gate. Francis Vere was twice wounded, but not disabled. Sir Roger Williams urged him to retire, but he replied that he would rather be killed ten times in a breach than once in a house.

Day by day the terrible struggle continued. The Spaniards were able constantly to bring up fresh troops, but the defenders had no relief. They were reduced in numbers from 1600 to 700 men, and yet for eighteen days they maintained the struggle, never once leaving the breach.

The pages brought their food to them, and when the attacks were fiercest joined in the defence, fighting as boldly and manfully as the soldiers themselves. Geoffrey and Lionel kept in close attendance upon Francis Vere, only leaving him to run back to their quarters and bring up the meals cooked for him and his two officers by Frau Menyn and her handmaids. Both kept close to him during the fighting. They knew that they were no match in strength for the Spanish pikemen; but they had obtained pistols from the armoury, and with these they did good service, several times freeing him from some of his assailants when he was sorely pressed. On one occasion when Francis Vere was smitten down by a blow from an axe, the boys rushed forward and kept back his assailants until some of the men of the company came to his aid.

"You have done me brave service indeed," Captain Vere said to them when he recovered; for his helmet had defended him from serious injury, though the force of the blow had felled him. "It was a happy thought of mine when I decided to bring you with

me. This is not the first time that you have rendered me good service, and I am sure you will turn out brave and valiant soldiers of the queen."

When each assault ceased the weary soldiers threw themselves down behind the earthen embankment, and obtained such sleep as they could before the Spaniards mustered for fresh attack. When, after eighteen days' terrible fighting, the Duke of Parma saw that even his best troops were unable to break through the wall of steel, he desisted from the assault and began the slower process of mining. The garrison from their lookout beheld the soldiers crossing the bridge with picks and shovels, and prepared to meet them in this new style of warfare. Captain Uvedale was appointed to command the men told off for this duty, and galleries were run from several of the cellars to meet those of the enemy.

As every man was employed either on the rampart or in mining, many of the pages were told off to act as watchers in the cellars, and to listen for the faint sounds that told of the approach of the enemy's miners. As the young Vickars were in attendance on the officers, they were exempted from this work; but they frequently went down into the cellars, both to watch the process of mining by their own men and to listen to the faint sounds made by the enemy's workmen. One day they were sitting on two wine kegs, watching four soldiers at work at the end of a short gallery that had been driven towards the Spaniards. Suddenly there was an explosion, the miners were blown backwards, the

end of the gallery disappeared, and a crowd of Walloon soldiers almost immediately afterwards rushed in.

The boys sprang to their feet and were about to fly, when an idea occurred to Geoffrey. He seized a torch, and, standing by the side of a barrel placed on end by a large tier, shouted in Dutch, "Another step forward and I fire the magazine!"

The men in front paused. Through the fumes of smoke they saw dimly the pile of barrels and a figure standing with a lighted torch close to one of them. A panic seized them, and believing they had made their way into a powder magazine, and that in another instant there would be a terrible explosion, they turned with shouts of "A magazine! a magazine! Fly, or we are all dead men!"

"Run, Lionel, and get help," Geoffrey said, and in two or three minutes a number of soldiers ran down into the cellar. The Walloons were not long before they recovered from their panic. Their officers knew that the wine cellars of the city were in front of them, and reassured them as to the character of the barrels they had seen. They were, however, too late, and a furious conflict took place at the entrance into the cellar, but the enemy, able only to advance two or three abreast, failed to force their way in.

Captain Uvedale and Francis Vere were soon on the spot, and when at last the enemy, unable to force an entrance, fell back, the former said, "This is just as I feared. You see, the Spaniards drove this gallery, and ceased to work immediately they heard us

approaching them. We had no idea that they were in front of us, and so they only had to put a barrel of powder there and fire it as soon as there was but a foot or two of earth between us and them."

"But how was it," Francis Vere asked, "that when they fired it they did not at once rush forward? They could have captured the whole building before we knew what had happened."

"That I cannot tell," Captain Uvedale replied. "The four men at work must have been either killed or knocked senseless. We shall know better another time, and will have a strong guard in each cellar from which our mines are being driven."

"If it please you, Captain Uvedale," Lionel said, "it was my brother Geoffrey who prevented them from advancing; for indeed several of them had already entered the cellar, and the gallery behind was full of them."

"But how did he do that?" Captain Uvedale asked in surprise.

Lionel related the ruse by which Geoffrey had created a panic in the minds of the Spaniards.

"That was well thought of indeed, and promptly carried out!" Captain Uvedale exclaimed. "Francis, these pages of yours are truly promising young fellows. They detected that rascally Dutchman who was betraying us. I noticed them several times in the thick of the fray at the breach; and now they have saved the city by their quickness and presence of mind; for had these Spaniards once got possession of this warehouse they would have speedily broken a way along through the whole tier, and could

then have poured in upon us with all their strength."

"That is so, indeed," Francis Vere agreed. "They have assuredly saved the town, and there is the greatest credit due to them. I shall be glad, Uvedale, if you will report the matter to our leader. You are in command of the mining works, and it will come better from you than from me who is their captain."

Captain Uvedale made his report, and both Sir Roger Williams and the governor thanked the boys, and especially Geoffrey, for the great service they had rendered.

Very shortly the galleries were broken into in several other places, and the battle became now as fierce and continuous down in the cellars as it had before been on the breach. By the light of torches, in an atmosphere heavy with the fumes of gunpowder, surrounded by piled up barrels of wine, the defenders and assailants maintained a terrible conflict, men staggering up exhausted by their exertion and by the stifling atmosphere while others took their places below, and so, night and day, the desperate struggle continued.

All these weeks no serious effort had been made for the relief of the beleaguered town. Captains Hall and Allen had several times swum down at night through the bridge of boats with letters from the governor entreating a speedy succour. The States had sent a fleet which sailed some distance up the Zwin, but returned without making the slightest effort to break through the bridge of boats. The Earl of Leicester had advanced with a considerable force from Ostend against the fortress of Blankenburg, but had

retreated hastily as soon as Parma despatched a portion of his army against him; and so the town was left to its fate.

The last letter that the governor despatched said that longer resistance was impossible. The garrison were reduced to a mere remnant, and these utterly worn out by constant fighting and the want of rest. He should ask for fair and honourable terms, but if these were refused the garrison and the whole male inhabitants in the city, putting the women and children in the centre, would sally out and cut their way through, or die fighting in the midst of the Spaniards. The swimmer who took the letter was drowned, but his body was washed ashore and the letter taken to the Duke of Parma.

Three days afterwards a fresh force of the enemy embarked in forty large boats, and were about to land on an unprotected wharf by the riverside when Arnold de Groenvelt hung out the white flag. His powder was exhausted and his guns disabled, and the garrison so reduced that the greater portion of the walls were left wholly undefended. The Duke of Parma, who was full of admiration at the extraordinary gallantry of the defenders, and was doubtless also influenced by the resolution expressed in his letter by the governor, granted them most honourable terms. The garrison were to march out with all their baggage and arms, with matches lighted and colours displayed. They were to proceed to Breskans, and there to embark for Flushing. The life and property of the inhabitants were to be respected, and all who did not choose to embrace the Catholic faith were to be allowed to leave

the town peaceably, taking with them their belongings, and to go wheresoever they pleased.

When the gates were opened the garrison sallied out. The Duke of Parma had an interview with several of the leaders, and expressed his high admiration of the valour with which they had fought, and said that the siege of Sluys had cost him more men than he had lost in the four principal sieges he had undertaken in the Low Country put together. On the 4th of August the duke entered Sluys in triumph, and at once began to make preparations to take part in the great invasion of England for which Spain was preparing.

After their arrival at Flushing Captains Vere, Uvedale, and others, who had brought their companies from Bergen op Zoom to aid in the defence of Sluys, returned to that town.

The Earl of Leicester shortly afterwards resigned his appointment as general of the army. He had got on but badly with the States General, and there was from the first no cordial cooperation between the two armies. The force at his disposal was never strong enough to do anything against the vastly superior armies of the Duke of Parma, who was one of the most brilliant generals of his age, while he was hampered and thwarted by the intrigues and duplicity of Elizabeth, who was constantly engaged in half hearted negotiations now with France and now with Spain, and whose capricious temper was continually overthrowing the best laid plans of her councillors and paralysing the actions of her commanders. It was not until

she saw her kingdom threatened by invasion that she placed herself fairly at the head of the national movement, and inspired her subjects with her energy and determination.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.