The First of the English: A Novel

Archibald Clavering Gunter

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THE FIRST OF THE ENGLISH

A NOVEL

BY

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THE FIRST OF THE ENGLISH.

BOOK I.

A STRANGE TRIP TO ANTWERP.

CHAPTER I.

THE FLOOD IN THE SCHELDE.

“First officer, where’s the boatswain?”

“Forward, sir, seeing the best bower cleared,” returns Harry Dalton, the ranking lieutenant of the Dover Lass.

“Very well, pass the word for the boatswain. He has the best nose on board this ship,” shouts Captain Guy Stanhope Chester.

“Aye, aye, sir!”

This being done, the young skipper, for he is hardly twenty-five, shaking the spray and sea water out of his tarpaulin, gropes his way to the binnacle, the lantern of which is shaded, partly to protect it from the weather and partly to prevent its light giving indication of the vessel’s whereabouts through the darkness of the night.

Taking the course of the vessel he glances at the two men lashed by the tiller to prevent their being washed overboard by the waves that have been chasing the ship ever since she left the white cliffs of England, and remarks: “Better cast yourselves loose lads, we are in quieter water now. There’s a bit of Flanders between us and the worst of the gale.”

A moment after the boatswain makes his appearance, a weather-beaten old tar of England; one of the new class of deep-water sailors that are being made by Drake and Frobisher in voyages to the Spanish Main and far Pacific. Plucking a grisly lock, this worthy, who would be all sea dog did he not wear a battered, steel breast-plate, salutes his captain, who says:

“How long since we passed Flushing, Martin Corker?”

“About four bells, your honor.”

“Two hours! I make it the same. Could you distinguish the place with your eye, boatswain?” asks Guy, clutching the mizzen rattlings of the Dover Lass, as she lurches before the northwest gale and rising tide.

“Not on this dark night, sir; but I made out the soundings by my lead, the land with my eye, and the slaughter houses on the shore with my nose.”

“So did I,” laughs Captain Chester. “You and I, Martin, have been up the Schelde often enough to nose out the channel on as dark a night as this, though the cursed Spaniards have torn up every buoy on the river.”

Then the young skipper, leading the first officer aside, continues very seriously and with knitted brows: “No chance of our meeting any of Alva’s galleys out in this chop sea on such a night as this.”

“No,” growls Dalton, “these Spanish lubbers are fair weather sailors.”

“Besides, in such a gale,” adds the captain, “the Dover Lass would make a fool of the bravest and biggest Spanish galleon that ever wallowed through the ocean;” and he looks with the pride and love of a sailor at the trim little ship, upon whose quarter-deck he stands, as she dashes through the waves of the Schelde estuary, tossing the water that comes over her bow gracefully into her lee scuppers, with the South Beveland on her lee and Flanders on her weather quarter.

But the night is so inky and the spray so blinding, Guy Chester’s sharp eyes can only discern half of his trim little vessel of about a hundred and thirty-five feet long, and two hundred and fifty tons burden, rigged in a fashion peculiar to the times of Queen Elizabeth

of England, with three masts, the main and the fore square-rigged, and the mizzen felucca-like, with a long lateen yard, from which would be expanded a fore and aft spanker, were not the vessel under storm canvas.

Below this top-hamper the Dover Lass shows on her decks as pretty a set of snarling teeth as any vessel of her size that sails from the shores of merry England—six long demi-culverins throwing nine-pound balls, on each broadside; four minions on her quarter-deck, three falcons as murdering pieces on her forecastle, and half a dozen serpentines mounted as swivels at convenient places on her bulwarks, which are unusually low for a vessel of that day. In this matter of cabins and bulwarks the Dover Lass is rather an anomaly, carrying no high poop nor forecastle, and consequently able to beat to windward with much greater facility than the ordinary ships of the sixteenth century.

Round the butts of her masts in racks are quantities of cutlasses, boarding pikes and battle axes; the arquebuses and pistols being kept by the armorer in the forecastle or in the captain's cabin.

Her crew, some hundred and twenty-five of as jovial sea dogs as ever cut a throat or scuttled a ship, are out of their hammocks to-night, every man Jack of them; lying in as comfortable places as they can find between the guns on the weather side of the deck and cracking sailor-jokes with each other in a manner unusual to a government cruiser.

Altogether the Dover Lass has the appearance of a man-of-war, though not its absolute discipline; and is evidently one of those vessels fitted out by private individuals to trade if they could, fight if

they must, and plunder the “Dons” everywhere and all the time; similar to the ships that, under Drake and Frobisher and old John Hawkins, were a greater terror to the Spaniards than any of the Queen’s vessels themselves.

“This is rather different to a week ago,” mutters the first officer, “when you, Captain Chester, were flaunting it with court beauties at Shene and Windsor.”

“And you were making love to every pretty lass in Harwich,” laughs his superior.

These remarks, though intended to be whispers, are really shouted, each man with his mouth at the other’s ear, for the screeching of the wind through the rigging and the smacks of the combing waves as they lash the vessel would almost drown the voice of old Stentor himself.

A moment later the boatswain touches his grisled lock and calls out to the captain: “Hadn’t I better get the second bower clear also?”

“Yes, we may need it with this sea,” assents the captain; while the first officer caustically remarks: “By old Boreas Bill, this is a rip-roarer of a night!”

“Aye, worse on shore than at sea,” answers Guy, bringing his tarpaulin close around him with one hand and with the other trying to keep on his head his sou’ wester, from under which a few Saxon curls blow out in spite of his efforts. All the time the three are stamping savagely on the deck, shaking off the water that comes flying over the rail, and restoring circulations that have been impaired by the searching northwester which has been beating upon them all this

awful night.

And it is an awful night; one of those nights that impresses itself upon the memory of suffering mankind by the widows it makes and the orphans it leaves; a night in which the sea drowns the land; a night in which the dykes go down before the dash of the ocean, which, tearing huge sluices in them, rushes through to make the unprotected meadows and growing orchards the beds of roaring torrents and deep salt seas that drown awakened farmers and affrighted peasants with their flying wives and children, in Flanders, Brabant, Zeeland, Friesland, and the islands and polders of both the Hollands; a night that brought up another wail from the Netherlanders, rich and poor, noble and bourgeoisie, who had been undergoing the tortures and burnings and flayings of Philip II. and Alva, his viceroy, for five long years; a night when the long-continued northwest gale blowing in from the German Ocean upon the unprotected dykes of Holland, supported by a tide of wondrous strength and height, sweeps in upon the defenseless Netherlands to remind them of that great flood shuddered at for centuries—that of the first of November, All Saints' night, of 1570—though this one is nearly two years afterwards, in the early spring of 1572. Evidences of the misery of the land soon come out of the darkness of the night. Lights move about hurriedly on the South Beveland shore, and the cries of a hundred drowning peasants come shrieking on the gale.

"By Saint George, there's a dyke gone!" cries Chester to his lieutenant, then he mutters: "God help the poor wretches, we can't!" as the ship speeds by, the gale now a little upon her starboard quarter.

A minute later he commands hurriedly: "Call two quartermasters and

heave the log."

This being done, he suddenly mutters: "Ten knots—and the tide four more! Two hours! We must be abeam of the Krom Vliet; the Drowned Lands are on our lee bow," then cries hurriedly to his lieutenant: "Go forward and see both the anchors are ready. We must bring up under the lee of South Beveland, in the slack water where the tide coming up the East Schelde meets the current of the main channel. If we get into the main river with this wind and tide our anchors will hardly hold us this side the Fort of Lillo, and that means capture and death to every man, Alva's death—you know what that is!"

To this the lieutenant shortly mutters, "I know!" and goes hurriedly forward, where he can be seen directing the men who have been summoned by the boatswain's call. Chester, standing beside the tiller, cons the vessel himself, giving his orders to the two helmsmen.

Half a minute later Martin Corker, the boatswain, comes staggering aft over the ship's slippery deck and hoarsely whispers: "Boats ahead!"

"How do you know? you couldn't see them to-night."

"Lights!"

"Ah! the lights of Sandvliet."

"No, boats! pistols firing—arquebuses! I saw the flashes of their guns three points on the lee bow, in the slack water under the shore of Beveland!"

"Then I can catch these boats," whispers the captain.

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