

CHAPTER XV  
HOW THE YELLOW COG SAILED FORTH FROM LEPE

That night the Company slept at St. Leonard's, in the great monastic barns and spicarium — ground well known both to Alleyne and to John, for they were almost within sight of the Abbey of Beaulieu. A strange thrill it gave to the young squire to see the well remembered white dress once more, and to hear the measured tolling of the deep vespers bell. At early dawn they passed across the broad, sluggish, reed-girt stream — men, horses, and baggage in the flat ferry barges — and so journeyed on through the fresh morning air past Exbury to Lepe. Topping the heathy down, they came of a sudden full in sight of the old sea port — a cluster of houses, a trail of blue smoke, and a bristle of masts. To right and left the long blue curve of the Solent lapped in a fringe of foam upon the yellow beach. Some way out from the town a line of pessoners, creyers, and other small craft were rolling lazily on the gentle swell. Further out still lay a great merchant ship, high ended, deep waisted, painted of a canary yellow, and towering above the fishing boats like a swan among ducklings.

“By St. Paul!” said the knight “Our good merchant of Southampton hath not played us false, for methinks I can see our ship down yonder. He said that she would be of great size and of a yellow shade.”

“By my hilt, yes!” muttered Aylward; “She is yellow as a kite's claw, and would carry as many men as there are pips in a pomegranate.”

“It is as well” remarked Terlake; “for methinks, my fair lord, that we are not the only ones who are waiting a passage to Gascony. Mine eye catches at times a flash and sparkle among yonder houses which assuredly never came from shipman's jacket or the gaberdine of a burgher.”

“I can also see it” said Alleyne, shading his eyes with his hand. “And I can see men-at-arms in yonder boats which ply betwixt the vessel and the shore. But methinks that we are very welcome here, for already they come forth to meet us.”

A tumultuous crowd of fishermen, citizens, and women had indeed swarmed out from the northern gate, and approached them up the side of the moor, waving their hands and dancing with joy, as though a great fear had been rolled back from their minds. At their head rode a very large and solemn man with a long chin and a drooping lip. He wore a fur tippet round his neck and a heavy gold chain over it, with a medallion which dangled in front of him.

“Welcome, most puissant and noble lord” he cried, doffing his bonnet to Black Simon. “I have heard of your lordship's valiant deeds, and in sooth they might be expected from your lordship's face and bearing. Is there any small matter in which I may oblige you?”

“Since you ask me” said the man-at-arms, “I would take it kindly if you could spare a link or two of the chain which hangs round your neck.”

“What, the corporation chain!” cried the other in horror. “The ancient chain of the township of Lepe! This is but a sorry jest, Sir Nigel.”

“What the plague did you ask me for then?” said Simon. “But if it is Sir Nigel Loring with whom you would speak, that is he upon the black horse.”

The Mayor of Lepe gazed with amazement on the mild face and slender frame of the famous warrior.

“Your pardon, my gracious lord” he cried. “You see in me the mayor and chief magistrate of the ancient and powerful town of Lepe. I bid you very heartily welcome, and the more so as you are come at a moment when we are sore put to it for means of defence.”

“Ha!” cried Sir Nigel, pricking up his ears.

“Yes, my lord, for the town being very ancient and the walls as old as the town, it follows that they are very ancient too. But there is a certain villainous and bloodthirsty Norman pirate hight Tete-noire, who, with a Genoan called Tito Caracci, commonly known as Spade-beard, hath been a mighty scourge upon these coasts. Indeed, my lord, they are very cruel and black-hearted men, graceless and ruthless, and if they should come to the ancient and powerful town of Lepe then —”

“Then goodbye to the ancient and powerful town of Lepe” quoth Ford, whose lightness of tongue could at times rise above his awe of Sir Nigel.

The knight, however, was too much intent upon the matter in hand to give heed to the flippancy of his squire. “Have you then cause” he asked “to think that these men are about to venture an attempt upon you?”

“They have come in two great galleys” answered the mayor, “with two bank of oars on either side, and great store of engines of war and of men-at-arms. At Weymouth and at Portland they have murdered and ravished. Yesterday morning they were at Cowes, and we saw the smoke from the burning crofts. Today they lie at their ease near Freshwater, and we fear much lest they come upon us and do us a mischief.”

“We cannot tarry” said Sir Nigel, riding towards the town, with the mayor upon his left side; “the Prince awaits us at Bordeaux, and we may not be behind the general muster. Yet I will promise you that on our way we shall find time to pass Freshwater and to prevail upon these rovers to leave you in peace.”

“We are much beholden to you!” cried the mayor “But I cannot see, my lord, how, without a warship, you may venture against these men. With your archers,

however, you might well hold the town and do them great scath if they attempt to land.”

“There is a very proper cog out yonder” said Sir Nigel, “it would be a very strange thing if any ship were not a warship when it had such men as these upon her decks. Certes, we shall do as I say, and that no later than this very day.”

“My lord” said a rough haired, dark faced man, who walked by the knight’s other stirrup, with his head sloped to catch all that he was saying. “By your leave, I have no doubt that you are skilled in land fighting and the marshalling of lances, but, by my soul! you will find it another thing upon the sea. I am the master shipman of this yellow cog, and my name is Goodwin Hawtayne. I have sailed since I was as high as this staff, and I have fought against these Normans and against the Genoese, as well as the Scotch, the Bretons, the Spanish, and the Moors. I tell you, sir, that my ship is over light and over frail for such work, and it will but end in our having our throats cut, or being sold as slaves to the Barbary heathen.”

“I also have experienced one or two gentle and honourable ventures upon the sea” quoth Sir Nigel “and I am right blithe to have so fair a task before us. I think, good master-shipman, that you and I may win great honour in this matter, and I can see very readily that you are a brave and stout man.”

“I like it not” said the other sturdily. “In God’s name, I like it not. And yet Goodwin Hawtayne is not the man to stand back when his fellows are for pressing forward. By my soul! Be it sink or swim, I shall turn her beak into Freshwater Bay, and if good Master Witherton, of Southampton, like not my handling of his ship then he may find another master shipman.”

They were close by the old north gate of the little town, and Alleyne, half turning in his saddle, looked back at the motley crowd who followed. The bowmen and men-at-arms had broken their ranks and were intermingled with the fishermen and citizens, whose laughing faces and hearty gestures bespoke the weight of care from which this welcome arrival had relieved them. Here and there among the moving throng of dark jerkins and of white surcoats were scattered dashes of scarlet and blue, the whimples or shawls of the women. Aylward, with a fishing lass on either arm, was vowing constancy alternately to her on the right and her on the left, while big John towered in the rear with a little chubby maiden enthroned upon his great shoulder, her soft white arm curled round his shining headpiece. So the throng moved on, until at the very gate it was brought to a stand by a wondrously fat man, who came darting forth from the town with rage in every feature of his rubicund face.

“How now, Sir Mayor?” he roared, in a voice like a bull. “How now, Sir Mayor? How of the clams and the scallops?”

“By Our Lady! My sweet Sir Oliver” cried the mayor. “I have had so much to think of, with these wicked villains so close upon us, that it had quite gone out of my head.”

“Words, words!” shouted the other furiously. “Am I to be put off with words? I say to you again, how of the clams and scallops?”

“My fair sir, you flatter me” cried the mayor. “I am a peaceful trader, and I am not wont to be so shouted at upon so small a matter.”

“Small!” shrieked the other. “Small! Clams and scallops! Ask me to your table to partake of the dainty of the town, and when I come a barren welcome and a bare board! Where is my spear bearer?”

“Nay, Sir Oliver, Sir Oliver!” cried Sir Nigel, laughing.

“Let your anger be appeased, since instead of this dish you come upon an old friend and comrade.”

“By St. Martin of Tours!” shouted the fat knight, his wrath all changed in an instant to joy, “If it is not my dear little game rooster of the Garonne. Ah, my sweet coz, I am right glad to see you. What days we have seen together!”

“Aye, by my faith” cried Sir Nigel, with sparkling eyes, “we have seen some valiant men, and we have shown our pennons in some noble skirmishes. By St. Paul! we have had great joys in France.”

“And sorrows also” quoth the other. “I have some sad memories of the land. Can you recall that which befell us at Libourne?”

“Nay, I cannot call to mind that we ever so much as drew sword at the place.”

“Man, man” cried Sir Oliver, “your mind still runs on nought but blades and bassinets. Hast no space in thy frame for the softer joys. Ah, even now I can scarce speak of it unmoved. So noble a pie, such tender pigeons, and sugar in the gravy instead of salt! You were by my side that day, as were Sir Claude Latour and the Lord of Pommers.”

“I remember it” said Sir Nigel, laughing, “and how you harried the cook down the street, and spoke of setting fire to the inn. By St. Paul! Most worthy mayor, my old friend is a perilous man, and I rede you that you compose your difference with him on such terms as you may.”

“The clams and scallops shall be ready within the hour” the mayor answered. “I had asked Sir Oliver Buttethorn to do my humble board the honour to partake at it of the dainty upon which we take some little pride, but in sooth this alarm of pirates hath cast such a shadow on my wits that I am like one distrait. But I trust, Sir Nigel, that you will also partake of none meat with me?”

“I have overmuch to do” Sir Nigel answered, “for we must be aboard, horse and man, as early as we may. How many do you muster, Sir Oliver?”

“Three and forty. The forty are drunk, and the three are but indifferent sober. I have them all safe upon the ship.”

“They had best find their wits again, for I shall have work for every man of them ere the sun set. It is my intention, if it seems good to you, to try a venture against these Norman and Genoese rovers.”

“They carry caviare and certain very noble spices from the Levant aboard of ships from Genoa” quoth Sir Oliver. “We may come to great profit through the business. I pray you, master shipman, that when you go on board you pour a helmetful of seawater over any of my rogues whom you may see there.”

Leaving the lusty knight and the Mayor of Lepe, Sir Nigel led the Company straight down to the water’s edge, where long lines of flat lighters swiftly bore them to their vessel. Horse after horse was slung by main force up from the barges, and after kicking and plunging in empty air was dropped into the deep waist of the yellow cog, where rows of stalls stood ready for their safe keeping. Englishmen in those days were skilled and prompt in such matters, for it was so not long before that Edward had embarked as many as fifty thousand men in the port of Orwell, with their horses and their baggage, all in the space of four and twenty hours. So urgent was Sir Nigel on the shore, and so prompt was Goodwin Hawtayne on the cog, that Sir Oliver Buttethorn had scarce swallowed his last scallop ere the peal of the trumpet and clang of nakir announced that all was ready and the anchor drawn. In the last boat which left the shore the two commanders sat together in the sheets, a strange contrast to one another, while under the feet of the rowers was a litter of huge stones which Sir Nigel had ordered to be carried to the cog. These once aboard, the ship set her broad mainsail, purple in colour, and with a golden St. Christopher bearing Christ upon his shoulder in the centre of it. The breeze blew, the sail bellied, over heeled the portly vessel, and away she plunged through the smooth blue rollers, amid the clang of the minstrels on her poop and the shouting of the black crowd who fringed the yellow beach. To the left lay the green Island of Wight, with its long, low, curving hills peeping over each other’s shoulders to the skyline; to the right the wooded Hampshire coast as far as eye could reach; above a steel-blue heaven, with a wintry sun shimmering down upon them, and enough of frost to set the breath a-smoking.

“By St. Paul!” said Sir Nigel gayly, as he stood upon the poop and looked on either side of him, “it is a land which is very well worth fighting for, and it were pity to go to France for what may be had at home. Did you not spy a crooked man upon the beach?”

“Nay, I spied nothing” grumbled Sir Oliver, “for I was hurried down with a clam stuck in my gizzard and an untasted goblet of Cyprus on the board behind me.”

“I saw him, my fair lord” said Terlake, “an old man with one shoulder higher than the other.”

“’Tis a sign of good fortune” quoth Sir Nigel. “Our path was also crossed by a woman and by a priest, so all should be well with us. What say you, Edricson?”

“I cannot tell, my fair lord. The Romans of old were a very wise people, yet, certes, they placed their faith in such matters. So, too, did the Greeks, and divers other ancient peoples who were famed for their learning. Yet of the moderns there are many who scoff at all omens.”

“There can be no manner of doubt about it” said Sir Oliver Buttethorn “I can well remember that in Navarre one day it thundered on the left out of a cloudless sky. We knew that ill would come of it, nor had we long to wait. Only thirteen days after, a haunch of prime venison was carried from my very tent door by the wolves, and on the same day two flasks of old vernage turned sour and muddy.”

“You may bring my harness from below” said Sir Nigel to his squires, “and also, I pray you, bring up Sir Oliver’s and we shall don it here. Ye may then see to your own gear; for this day you will, I hope, make a very honourable entrance into the field of chivalry, and prove yourselves to be very worthy and valiant squires. And now, Sir Oliver, as to our dispositions: would it please you that I should order them or will you?”

“You, my cockerel, you. By Our Lady! I am no chicken, but I cannot claim to know as much of war as the squire of Sir Walter Manny. Settle the matter to your own liking.”

“You shall fly your pennon upon the fore part, then, and I upon the poop. For foreguard I shall give you your own forty men, with two score archers. Two score men, with my own men-at-arms and squires, will serve as a poop guard. Ten archers, with thirty shipmen, under the master, may hold the waist while ten lie aloft with stones and arbalests. How like you that?”

“Good, by my faith, good! But here comes my harness, and I must to work, for I cannot slip into it as I was wont when first I set my face to the wars.”

Meanwhile there had been bustle and preparation in all parts of the great vessel. The archers stood in groups about the decks, new-stringing their bows, and testing that they were firm at the nocks. Among them moved Aylward and other of the older soldiers, with a few whispered words of precept here and of warning there.

“Stand to it, my hearts of gold” said the old bowman as he passed from knot to knot. “By my hilt! we are in luck this journey. Bear in mind the old saying of the Company.”

“What is that, Aylward?” cried several, leaning on their bows and laughing at him.

“’Tis the master-bowyer’s rede: ‘Every bow well bent. Every shaft well sent. Every stave well nocked. Every string well locked.’ There, with that jingle in his head, a bracer on his left hand, a shooting glove on his right, and a farthing’s worth of wax in his girdle, what more doth a bowman need?”

“It would not be amiss” said Hordle John, “if under his girdle he had four farthings’ worth of wine.”

“Work first, wine afterwards, mon camarade. But it is time that we took our order, for methinks that between the Needle rocks and the Alum cliffs yonder I can catch a glimpse of the topmasts of the galleys. Hewett, Cook, Johnson, Cunningham, your men are of the poop guard. Thornbury, Walters, Hackett, Baddlesmere, you are with Sir Oliver on the forecastle. Simon, you bide with your lord’s banner; but ten men must go forward.”

Quietly and promptly the men took their places, lying flat upon their faces on the deck, for such was Sir Nigel’s order. Near the prow was planted Sir Oliver’s spear, with his arms — a boar’s head gules upon a field of gold. Close by the stern stood Black Simon with the pennon of the house of Loring. In the waist gathered the Southampton mariners, hairy and burly men, with their jerkins thrown off, their waists braced tight, swords, mallets, and poleaxes in their hands. Their leader, Goodwin Hawtayne, stood upon the poop and talked with Sir Nigel, casting his eye up sometimes at the swelling sail, and then glancing back at the two seamen who held the tiller.

“Pass the word” said Sir Nigel, “that no man shall stand to arms or draw his bowstring until my trumpeter shall sound. It would be well that we should seem to be a merchant ship from Southampton and appear to flee from them.”

“We shall see them anon” said the master shipman. “Ha, said I not so? There they lie, the water snakes, in Freshwater Bay; and mark the reek of smoke from yonder point, where they have been at their devil’s work. See how their shallops pull from the land! They have seen us and called their men aboard. Now they draw upon the anchor. See them like ants upon the forecastle! They stoop and heave like handy ship men. But, my fair lord, these are no niefs. I doubt but we have taken in hand more than we can do. Each of these ships is a galesse, and of the largest and swiftest make.”

“I would I had your eyes” said Sir Nigel, blinking at the pirate galleys. “They seem very gallant ships, and I trust that we shall have much pleasance from our meeting with them. It would be well to pass the word that we should neither give nor take quarter this day. Have you perchance a priest or friar aboard this ship, Master Hawtayne?”

“No, my fair lord.”

“Well, well, it is no great matter for my Company, for they were all houseled and shriven ere we left Twynham Castle; and Father Christopher of the Priory gave me his word that they were as fit to march to heaven as to Gascony. But my mind misdoubts me as to these Winchester men who have come with Sir Oliver, for they appear to be a very ungodly crew. Pass the word that the men kneel, and that the under officers repeat to them the pater, the ave, and the credo.”

With a clank of arms, the rough archers and seamen took to their knees, with bent heads and crossed hands, listening to the hoarse mutter from the file-leaders. It was strange to mark the hush; so that the lapping of the water, the straining of the sail, and the creaking of the timbers grew louder of a sudden upon the ear. Many of the bowmen had drawn amulets and relics from their bosoms, while he who possessed some more than usually sanctified treasure passed it down the line of his comrades, that all might kiss and reap the virtue.

The yellow cog had now shot out from the narrow waters of the Solent, and was plunging and rolling on the long heave of the open channel. The wind blew freshly from the east, with a very keen edge to it; and the great sail bellied roundly out, laying the vessel over until the water hissed beneath her lee bulwarks. Broad and ungainly, she floundered from wave to wave, dipping her round bows deeply into the blue rollers, and sending the white flakes of foam in a spatter over her decks. On her larboard quarter lay the two dark galleys, which had already hoisted sail, and were shooting out from Freshwater Bay in swift pursuit, their double line of oars giving them a vantage which could not fail to bring them up with any vessel which trusted to sails alone. High and bluff the English cog; long, black and swift the pirate galleys, like two fierce lean wolves which have seen a lordly and unsuspecting stag walk past their forest lair.

“Shall we turn, my fair lord, or shall we carry on?” asked the master shipman, looking behind him with anxious eyes.

“Nay, we must carry on and play the part of the helpless merchant.”

“But your pennons? They will see that we have two knights with us.”

“Yet it would not be to a knight’s honour or good name to lower his pennon. Let them be, and they will think that we are a wine ship for Gascony, or that we bear the wool bales of some mercer of the Staple. Ma foi, but they are very swift! They swoop upon us like two goshawks on a heron. Is there not some symbol or device upon their sails?”

“That on the right” said Edricson, “appears to have the head of an Ethiop upon it.”

“’Tis the badge of Tete-noire, the Norman” cried a seaman mariner. “I have seen it before, when he harried us at Winchelsea. He is a wondrous large and strong man, with no ruth for man, woman, or beast. They say that he hath the



strength of six; and, certes, he hath the crimes of six upon his soul. See, now, to the poor souls who swing at either end of his yardarm!"

At each end of the yard there did indeed hang the dark figure of a man, jolting and lurching with hideous jerkings of its limbs at every plunge and swoop of the galley.

"By St. Paul!" said Sir Nigel "And by the help of St. George and Our Lady, it will be a very strange thing if our black-headed friend does not himself swing thence ere he be many hours older. But what is that upon the other galley?"

"It is the red cross of Genoa. This Spade-beard is a very noted captain, and it is his boast that there are no seamen and no archers in the world who can compare with those who serve the Doge Boccanegra."

"That we shall prove" said Goodwin Hawtayne; "but it would be well, ere they close with us, to raise up the mantlets and pavises as a screen against their bolts." He shouted a hoarse order, and his seamen worked swiftly and silently, heightening the bulwarks and strengthening them. The three ship's anchors were at Sir Nigel's command carried into the waist, and tied to the mast, with twenty feet of cable between, each under the care of four seamen. Eight others were stationed with leather water bags to quench any fire arrows which might come aboard, while others were sent up the mast, to lie along the yard and drop stones or shoot arrows as the occasion served.

"Let them be supplied with all that is heavy and weighty in the ship" said Sir Nigel.

"Then we must send them up Sir Oliver Buttethorn" quoth Ford.

The knight looked at him with a face which struck the smile from his lips. "No squire of mine" he said, "shall ever make jest of a belted knight. And yet" he added, his eyes softening, "I know that it is but a boy's mirth, with no sting in it. Yet I should ill do my part towards your father if I did not teach you to curb your tongue play."

"They will lay us aboard on either quarter, my lord" cried the master. "See how they stretch out from each other! The Norman hath a mangonel or a trabuch upon the forecastle. See, they bend to the levers! They are about to loose it."

"Aylward" cried the knight, "pick your three trustiest archers, and see if you cannot do something to hinder their aim. Methinks they are within long arrow flight."

"Seventeen score paces" said the archer, running his eye backwards and forwards. "By my ten finger bones! it would be a strange thing if we could not notch a mark at that distance. Here, Watkin of Sowley, Arnold, Long Williams, let us show the rogues that they have English bowmen to deal with."

The three archers named stood at the further end of the poop, balancing themselves with feet widely spread and bows drawn, until the heads of the cloth yard arrows were level with the centre of the stave. "You are the surer, Watkin" said Aylward, standing by them with shaft upon string. "Do you take the rogue with the red coif. You two bring down the man with the headpiece, and I will hold myself ready if you miss. Ma foi! they are about to loose her. Shoot, mes garçons, or you will be too late."

The throng of pirates had cleared away from the great wooden catapult, leaving two of their number to discharge it. One in a scarlet cap bent over it, steadying the jagged rock which was balanced on the spoon shaped end of the long wooden lever. The other held the loop of the rope which would release the catch and send the unwieldy missile hurtling through the air. So for an instant they stood, showing hard and clear against the white sail behind them. The next, redcap had fallen across the stone with an arrow between his ribs; and the other, struck in the leg and in the throat, was writhing and spluttering upon the ground. As he toppled backwards he had loosed the spring, and the huge beam of wood, swinging round with tremendous force, cast the corpse of his comrade so close to the English ship that its mangled and distorted limbs grazed their very stern. As to the stone, it glanced off obliquely and fell midway between the vessels. A roar of cheering and of laughter broke from the rough archers and seamen at the sight, answered by a yell of rage from their pursuers.

"Lie low, mes enfants" cried Aylward, motioning with his left hand. "They will learn wisdom. They are bringing forward shield and mantlet. We shall have some pebbles about our ears ere long."

CHAPTER XVI  
HOW THE YELLOW COG FOUGHT THE TWO ROVER GALLEYS

The three vessels had been sweeping swiftly westwards, the cog still well to the front, although the galleys were slowly drawing in upon either quarter. To the left was a hard skyline unbroken by a sail. The island already lay like a cloud behind them, while right in front was St. Alban's Head, with Portland looming mistily in the farthest distance. Alleyne stood by the tiller, looking backwards, the fresh wind full in his teeth, the crisp winter air tingling on his face and blowing his yellow curls from under his bassinet. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes shining, for the blood of a hundred fighting Saxon ancestors was beginning to stir in his veins.

"What was that?" he asked, as a hissing, sharp drawn voice seemed to whisper in his ear. The steersman smiled, and pointed with his foot to where a short heavy crossbow quarrel stuck quivering in the boards. At the same instant the man stumbled forward upon his knees, and lay lifeless upon the deck, a bloodstained feather jutting out from his back. As Alleyne stooped to raise him, the air seemed to be alive with the sharp zip-zip of the bolts, and he could hear them pattering on the deck like apples at a tree shaking.

"Raise two more mantlets by the poop lanthorn" said Sir Nigel quietly.

"And another man to the tiller" cried the master shipman.

"Keep them in play, Aylward, with ten of your men" the knight continued. "And let ten of Sir Oliver's bowmen do as much for the Genoese. I have no mind as yet to show them how much they have to fear from us."

Ten picked shots under Aylward stood in line across the broad deck, and it was a lesson to the young squires who had seen nothing of war to note how orderly and how cool were these old soldiers, how quick the command, and how prompt the carrying out, ten moving like one. Their comrades crouched beneath the bulwarks, with many a rough jest and many a scrap of criticism or advice. "Higher, Wat, higher!" "Put thy body into it, Will!" "Forget not the wind, Hal!" So ran the muttered chorus, while high above it rose the sharp twanging of the strings, the hiss of the shafts, and the short "Draw your arrow! Nick your arrow! Shoot wholly together!" from the master bowman.

And now both mangonels were at work from the galleys, but so covered and protected that, save at the moment of discharge, no glimpse could be caught of them. A huge brown rock from the Genoese sang over their heads, and plunged sullenly into the slope of a wave. Another from the Norman whizzed into the waist, broke the back of a horse, and crashed its way through the side of the vessel. Two others, flying together, tore a great gap in the St. Christopher upon the sail, and brushed three of Sir Oliver's men-at-arms from the forecastle. The master shipman looked at the knight with a troubled face.

“They keep their distance from us” said he. “Our archery is overgood, and they will not close. What defence can we make against the stones?”

“I think I may trick them” the knight answered cheerfully, and passed his order to the archers. Instantly five of them threw up their hands and fell prostrate upon the deck. One had already been slain by a bolt, so that there were but four upon their feet.

“That should give them heart” said Sir Nigel, eyeing the galleys, which crept along on either side, with a slow, measured swing of their great oars, the water swirling and foaming under their sharp stems.

“They still hold aloof” cried Hawtayne.

“Then down with two more” shouted their leader. “That will do. Ma foi! but they come to our lure like chicks to the fowler. To your arms, men! The pennon behind me, and the squires round the pennon. Stand fast with the anchors in the waist, and be ready for a cast. Now blow out the trumpets, and may God’s benison be with the honest men!”

As he spoke a roar of voices and a roll of drums came from either galley, and the water was lashed into spray by the hurried beat of a hundred oars. Down they swooped, one on the right, one on the left, the sides and shrouds black with men and bristling with weapons. In heavy clusters they hung upon the forecastle all ready for a spring — faces white, faces brown, faces yellow, and faces black, fair Norsemen, swarthy Italians, fierce rovers from the Levant, and fiery Moors from the Barbary States, of all hues and countries, and marked solely by the common stamp of a wild beast ferocity. Rasping up on either side, with oars trailing to save them from snapping, they poured in a living torrent with horrid yell and shrill whoop upon the defenceless merchantman.

But wilder yet was the cry, and shriller still the scream, when there rose up from the shadow of those silent bulwarks the long lines of the English bowmen, and the arrows whizzed in a deadly sleet among the unprepared masses upon the pirate decks. From the higher sides of the cog the bowmen could shoot straight down, at a range which was so short as to enable a clothyard shaft to pierce through mail coats or to transfix a shield, though it were an inch thick of toughened wood. One moment Alleyne saw the galley’s poop crowded with rushing figures, waving arms, exultant faces; the next it was a blood smeared shambles, with bodies piled three deep upon each other, the living cowering behind the dead to shelter themselves from that sudden storm blast of death. On either side the seamen whom Sir Nigel had chosen for the purpose had cast their anchors over the side of the galleys, so that the three vessels, locked in an iron grip, lurched heavily forward upon the swell.

And now set in a fell and fierce fight, one of a thousand of which no chronicler has spoken and no poet sung. Through all the centuries and over all those southern waters nameless men have fought in nameless places, their sole monuments a protected coast and an unravaged countryside.

Fore and aft the archers had cleared the galleys' decks, but from either side the rovers had poured down into the waist, where the seamen and bowmen were pushed back and so mingled with their foes that it was impossible for their comrades above to draw string to help them. It was a wild chaos where axe and sword rose and fell, while Englishman, Norman, and Italian staggered and reeled on a deck which was cumbered with bodies and slippery with blood. The clang of blows, the cries of the stricken, the short, deep shout of the islanders, and the fierce whoops of the rovers, rose together in a deafening tumult, while the breath of the panting men went up in the wintry air like the smoke from a furnace. The giant Tete-noire, towering above his fellows and clad from head to foot in plate of proof, led on his boarders, waving a huge mace in the air, with which he struck to the deck every man who approached him. On the other side, Spade-beard, a dwarf in height, but of great breadth of shoulder and length of arm, had cut a road almost to the mast, with three score Genoese men-at-arms close at his heels. Between these two formidable assailants the seamen were being slowly wedged more closely together, until they stood back to back under the mast with the rovers raging upon every side of them.

But help was close at hand. Sir Oliver Buttethorn with his men-at-arms had swarmed down from the forecastle, while Sir Nigel, with his three squires, Black Simon, Aylward, Hordle John, and a score more, threw themselves from the poop and hurled themselves into the thickest of the fight. Alleyne, as in duty bound, kept his eyes fixed ever on his lord and pressed forward close at his heels. Often had he heard of Sir Nigel's prowess and skill with all knightly weapons, but all the tales that had reached his ears fell far short of the real quickness and coolness of the man. It was as if the devil was in him, for he sprang here and sprang there, now thrusting and now cutting, catching blows on his shield, turning them with his blade, stooping under the swing of an axe, springing over the sweep of a sword, so swift and so erratic that the man who braced himself for a blow at him might find him six paces off ere he could bring it down. Three pirates had fallen before him, and he had wounded Spade-beard in the neck, when the Norman giant sprang at him from the side with a slashing blow from his deadly mace. Sir Nigel stooped to avoid it, and at the same instant turned a thrust from the Genoese swordsman, but, his foot slipping in a pool of blood, he fell heavily to the ground. Alleyne sprang in front of the Norman, but his sword was shattered and he himself beaten to the ground by a second blow from the ponderous weapon. Ere the pirate chief could repeat it, however, John's iron grip fell upon his wrist, and he found that for once he was in the hands of a stronger man than himself.

Fiercely he strove to disengage his weapon, but Hordle John bent his arm slowly back until, with a sharp crack, like a breaking stave, it turned limp in his grasp, and the mace dropped from the nerveless fingers. In vain he tried to pluck it up with the other hand. Back and back still his foeman bent him, until, with a roar of pain and of fury, the giant clanged his full length upon the boards, while the glimmer of a knife before the bars of his helmet warned him that short would be his shrift if he moved.

Cowed and disheartened by the loss of their leader, the Normans had given back and were now streaming over the bulwarks on to their own galley, dropping a dozen at a time on to her deck. But the anchor still held them in its crooked claw, and Sir Oliver with fifty men was hard upon their heels. Now, too, the archers had room to draw their bows once more, and great stones from the yard of the cog came thundering and crashing among the flying rovers. Here and there they rushed with wild screams and curses, diving under the sail, crouching behind booms, huddling into corners like rabbits when the ferrets are upon them, as helpless and as hopeless. They were stern days, and if the honest soldier, too poor for a ransom, had no prospect of mercy upon the battlefield, what ruth was there for sea robbers, the enemies of humankind, taken in the very deed, with proofs of their crimes still swinging upon their yardarm.

But the fight had taken a new and a strange turn upon the other side. Spadebeard and his men had given slowly back, hard pressed by Sir Nigel, Aylward, Black Simon, and the poop guard. Foot by foot the Italian had retreated, his armour running blood at every joint, his shield split, his crest shorn, his voice fallen away to a mere gasping and croaking. Yet he faced his foemen with dauntless courage, dashing in, springing back, sure footed, steady handed, with a point which seemed to menace three at once. Beaten back on to the deck of his own vessel, and closely followed by a dozen Englishmen, he disengaged himself from them, ran swiftly down the deck, sprang back into the cog once more, cut the rope which held the anchor, and was back in an instant among his crossbowmen. At the same time the Genoese sailors thrust with their oars against the side of the cog, and a rapidly widening rift appeared between the two vessels.

“By St. George!” cried Ford, “we are cut off from Sir Nigel.”

“He is lost” gasped Terlake. “Come, let us spring for it.” The two youths jumped with all their strength to reach the departing galley. Ford’s feet reached the edge of the bulwarks, and his hand clutching a rope he swung himself on board. Terlake fell short, crashed in among the oars, and bounded off into the sea. Alleyne, staggering to the side, was about to hurl himself after him, but Hordle John dragged him back by the girdle.

“You can scarce stand, lad, far less jump” said he. “See how the blood rips from your bassinet.”

“My place is by the flag” cried Alleyne, vainly struggling to break from the other’s hold.

“Bide here, man. You would need wings ere you could reach Sir Nigel’s side.”

The vessels were indeed so far apart now that the Genoese could use the full sweep of their oars, and draw away rapidly from the cog.

“My God, but it is a noble fight!” shouted big John, clapping his hands. “They have cleared the poop, and they spring into the waist. Well struck, my lord! Well struck, Aylward! See to Black Simon, how he storms among the shipmen! But this Spade-beard is a gallant warrior. He rallies his men upon the forecastle. He hath slain an archer. Ha! my lord is upon him. Look to it, Alleyne! See to the whirl and glitter of it!”

“By heaven, Sir Nigel is down!” cried the squire.

“Up!” roared John. “It was but a feint. He bears him back. He drives him to the side. Ah, by Our Lady, his sword is through him! They cry for mercy. Down goes the red cross, and up springs Simon with the scarlet roses!”

The death of the Genoese leader did indeed bring the resistance to an end. Amid a thunder of cheering from cog and from galleys the forked pennon fluttered upon the forecastle, and the galley, sweeping round, came slowly back, as the slaves who rowed it learned the wishes of their new masters.

The two knights had come aboard the cog, and the grapplings having been thrown off, the three vessels now moved abreast. Through all the storm and rush of the fight Alleyne had been aware of the voice of Goodwin Hawtayne, the master shipman, with his constant “Hale the bowline! Veer the sheet!” and strange it was to him to see how swiftly the bloodstained sailors turned from the strife to the ropes and back. Now the cog’s head was turned Francewards, and the shipman walked the deck, a peaceful master mariner once more.

“There is sad scath done to the cog, Sir Nigel” said he. “Here is a hole in the side two ells across, the sail split through the centre, and the wood as bare as a friar’s poll. In good sooth, I know not what I shall say to Master Witherton when I see the Itchen once more.”

“By St. Paul! it would be a very sorry thing if we suffered you to be the worse of this day’s work” said Sir Nigel. “You shall take these galleys back with you, and Master Witherton may sell them. Then from the moneys he shall take as much as may make good the damage, and the rest he shall keep until our homecoming, when every man shall have his share. An image of silver fifteen inches high I have vowed to the Virgin, to be placed in her chapel within the Priory, for that she was pleased to allow me to come upon this Spade-beard, who seemed to me from what I have seen of him to be a very sprightly and valiant gentleman. But how fares it with you, Edricson?”

“It is nothing, my fair lord” said Alleyne, who had now loosened his bassinet, which was cracked across by the Norman’s blow. Even as he spoke, however, his head swirled round, and he fell to the deck with the blood gushing from his nose and mouth.

“He will come to anon” said the knight, stooping over him and passing his fingers through his hair. “I have lost one very valiant and gentle squire this day. I can ill afford to lose another. How many men have fallen?”

“I have pricked off the tally” said Aylward, who had come aboard with his lord. “There are seven of the Winchester men, eleven seamen, your squire, young Master Terlake, and nine archers.”

“And of the others?”

“They are all dead — save only the Norman knight who stands behind you. What would you that we should do with him?”

“He must hang on his own yard” said Sir Nigel. “It was my vow and must be done.”

The pirate leader had stood by the bulwarks, a cord round his arms, and two stout archers on either side. At Sir Nigel’s words he started violently, and his swarthy features blanched to a livid grey.

“How, Sir Knight?” he cried in broken English. “Que dites vous? To hang, le mort du chien! To hang!”

“It is my vow” said Sir Nigel shortly. “From what I hear, you thought little enough of hanging others.”

“Peasants, base roturiers” cried the other. “It is their fitting death. Mais Le Seigneur d’Andelys, avec le sang des rois dans ses veins! C’est incroyable!”

Sir Nigel turned upon his heel, while two seamen cast a noose over the pirate’s neck. At the touch of the cord he snapped the bonds which bound him, dashed one of the archers to the deck, and seizing the other round the waist sprang with him into the sea.

“By my hilt, he is gone!” cried Aylward, rushing to the side. “They have sunk together like a stone.”

“I am right glad of it” answered Sir Nigel; “for though it was against my vow to loose him, I deem that he has carried himself like a very gentle and debonnaire cavalier.”



CHAPTER XVII  
HOW THE YELLOW COG CROSSED THE BAR OF GIRONDE

For two days the yellow cog ran swiftly before a northeasterly wind, and on the dawn of the third the high land of Ushant lay like a mist upon the shimmering sky-line. There came a plump of rain towards midday and the breeze died down, but it freshened again before nightfall, and Goodwin Hawtayne veered his sheet and held head for the south. Next morning they had passed Belle Isle, and ran through the midst of a fleet of transports returning from Guienne. Sir Nigel Loring and Sir Oliver Buttethorn at once hung their shields over the side, and displayed their pennons as was the custom, noting with the keenest interest the answering symbols which told the names of the cavaliers who had been constrained by ill health or wounds to leave the prince at so critical a time.

That evening a great dun coloured cloud banked up in the west, and an anxious man was Goodwin Hawtayne, for a third part of his crew had been slain, and half the remainder were aboard the galleys, so that, with an injured ship, he was little fit to meet such a storm as sweeps over those waters. All night it blew in short fitful puffs, heeling the great cog over until the water curled over her lee bulwarks. As the wind still freshened the yard was lowered halfway down the mast in the morning. Alleyne, wretchedly ill and weak, with his head still ringing from the blow which he had received, crawled up upon deck. Waterswept and aslant, it was preferable to the noisome, rat haunted dungeons which served as cabins. There, clinging to the stout halliards of the sheet, he gazed with amazement at the long lines of black waves, each with its curling ridge of foam, racing in endless succession from out the inexhaustible west. A huge sombre cloud, flecked with livid blotches, stretched over the whole seaward skyline, with long ragged streamers whirled out in front of it. Far behind them the two galleys laboured heavily, now sinking between the rollers until their yards were level with the waves, and again shooting up with a reeling, scooping motion until every spar and rope stood out hard against the sky. On the left the low lying land stretched in a dim haze, rising here and there into a darker blur which marked the higher capes and headlands. The land of France! Alleyne's eyes shone as he gazed upon it. The land of France! — The very words sounded as the call of a bugle in the ears of the youth of England. The land where their fathers had bled, the home of chivalry and of knightly deeds, the country of gallant men, of courtly women, of princely buildings, of the wise, the polished and the sainted. There it lay, so still and grey beneath the drifting wrack — the home of things noble and of things shameful — the theatre where a new name might be made or an old one marred. From his bosom to his lips came the crumpled veil, and he breathed a vow that if valour and goodwill could raise him to his lady's side, then death alone should hold him back from her. His thoughts were still in the woods of Minstead and the old armoury of Twynham Castle, when the hoarse voice of the master shipman brought them back once more to the Bay of Biscay.

“By my troth, young sir” he said, “you are as long in the face as the devil at a christening, and I cannot marvel at it, for I have sailed these waters since I was as high as this whinyard, and yet I never saw more sure promise of an evil night.”

“Nay, I had other things upon my mind” the squire answered.

“And so has every man” cried Hawtayne in an injured voice. “Let the shipman see to it. It is the master shipman’s affair. Put it all upon good Master Hawtayne! Never had I so much care since first I blew trumpet and showed cartel at the west gate of Southampton.”

“What is amiss then?” asked Alleyne, for the man’s words were as gusty as the weather.

“Amiss, quotha? Here am I with but half my mariners, and a hole in the ship where that twenty-devil stone struck us big enough to fit the fat widow of Northam through. It is well enough on this tack, but I would have you tell me what I am to do on the other. We are like to have salt water upon us until we be found pickled like the herrings in an Easterling’s barrels.”

“What says Sir Nigel to it?”

“He is below pricking out the coat armour of his mother’s uncle. ‘Pester me not with such small matters!’ was all that I could get from him. Then there is Sir Oliver. ‘Fry them in oil with a dressing of Gascony,’ quoth he, and then swore at me because I had not been the cook. ‘Walawa’ thought I ‘mad master, sober man’ — so away forward to the archers. Harrow and alas! But they were worse than the others.”

“Would they not help you then?”

“Nay, they sat tway and tway at a board, him that they call Aylward and the great red-headed man who snapped the Norman’s arm bone, and the black man from Norwich, and a score of others, rattling their dice in an archer’s gauntlet for want of a box. ‘The ship can scarce last much longer, my masters’ quoth I. ‘That is your business, old swine’s-head’ cried the black galliard. ‘Le diable t’emporte’ says Aylward. ‘A five, a four and the main’ shouted the big man, with a voice like the flap of a sail. Hark to them now, young sir, and say if I speak not sooth.”

As he spoke, there sounded high above the shriek of the gale and the straining of the timbers a gust of oaths with a roar of deep chested mirth from the gamblers in the forecastle.

“Can I be of avail?” asked Alleyne. “Say the word and the thing is done, if two hands may do it.”

“Nay, nay, your head I can see is still totty, and i’ faith little head would you have, had your bassinet not stood your friend. All that may be done is already carried out, for we have stuffed the gape with sails and corded it without and within. Yet when we bale our bowline and veer the sheet our lives will hang upon the breach remaining blocked. See how yonder headland looms upon us through the mist! We must tack within three arrow flights, or we may find a rock through our timbers. Now, St. Christopher be praised! Here is Sir Nigel, with whom I may confer.”

“I prythee that you will pardon me” said the knight, clutching his way along the bulwark. “I would not show lack of courtesy toward a worthy man, but I was deep in a matter of some weight, concerning which, Alleyne, I should be glad of your rede. It touches the question of dimidiation or impalement in the coat of mine uncle, Sir John Leighton of Shropshire, who took unto wife the widow of Sir Henry Oglander of Nunwell. The case has been much debated by pursuivants and kings-of-arms. But how is it with you, master shipman?”

“Ill enough, my fair lord. The cog must go about anon, and I know not how we may keep the water out of her.”

“Go call Sir Oliver!” said Sir Nigel, and presently the portly knight made his way all astraddle down the slippery deck.

“By my soul, master shipman, this passes all patience!” he cried wrathfully. “If this ship of yours must needs dance and skip like a clown at a kermesse, then I pray you that you will put me into one of these galeasses. I had but sat down to a flask of malvoisie and a mortress of brawn, as is my use about this hour, when there comes a cherking, and I find my wine over my legs and the flask in my lap, and then as I stoop to clip it there comes another cursed cherk, and there is a mortress of brawn stuck fast to the nape of my neck. At this moment I have two pages coursing after it from side to side, like hounds behind a leveret. Never did living pig gambol more lightly. But you have sent for me, Sir Nigel?”

“I would fain have your rede, Sir Oliver, for Master Hawtayne hath fears that when we veer there may come danger from the hole in our side.”

“Then do not veer” quoth Sir Oliver hastily. “And now, fair sir, I must hasten back to see how my rogues have fared with the brawn.”

“Nay, but this will scarce suffice” cried the shipman. “If we do not veer we will be upon the rocks within the hour.”

“Then veer” said Sir Oliver. “There is my rede; and now, Sir Nigel, I must crave \_\_\_”

At this instant, however, a startled shout rang out from two seamen upon the forecastle. “Rocks!” they yelled, stabbing into the air with their forefingers. “Rocks beneath our very bows!” Through the belly of a great black wave, not

one hundred paces to the front of them, there thrust forth a huge jagged mass of brown stone, which spouted spray as though it were some crouching monster, while a dull menacing boom and roar filled the air.

“Yare! yare!” screamed Goodwin Hawtayne, flinging himself upon the long pole which served as a tiller. “Cut the halliard! Haul her over! Lay her two courses to the wind!”

Over swung the great boom, and the cog trembled and quivered within five spear lengths of the breakers.

“She can scarce draw clear” cried Hawtayne, with his eyes from the sail to the seething line of foam. “May the holy Julian stand by us and the thrice sainted Christopher!”

“If there be such peril, Sir Oliver” quoth Sir Nigel, “it would be very knightly and fitting that we should show our pennons. I pray you, Edricson, that you will command my guidon bearer to put forward my banner.”

“And sound the trumpets!” cried Sir Oliver. “In manus tuas, Domine! I am in the keeping of James of Compostella, to whose shrine I shall make pilgrimage, and in whose honour I vow that I will eat a carp each year upon his feast day. Mon Dieu, but the waves roar! How is it with us now, master shipman?”

“We draw! We draw!” cried Hawtayne, with his eyes still fixed upon the foam which hissed under the very bulge of the side. “Ah, Holy Mother, be with us now!”

As he spoke the cog rasped along the edge of the reef, and a long white curling sheet of wood was planed off from her side from waist to poop by a jutting horn of the rock. At the same instant she lay suddenly over, the sail drew full, and she plunged seawards amid the shoutings of the seamen and the archers.

“The Virgin be praised!” cried the shipman, wiping his brow. “For this shall bell swing and candle burn when I see Southampton Water once more. Cheerily, my hearts! Pull yarely on the bowline!”

“By my soul! I would rather have a dry death” quoth Sir Oliver. “Though, Mort Dieu! I have eaten so many fish that it were but justice that the fish should eat me. Now I must back to the cabin, for I have matters there which crave my attention.”

“Nay, Sir Oliver, you had best bide with us, and still show your ensign” Sir Nigel answered; “for, if I understand the matter aright, we have but turned from one danger to the other.”

“Good Master Hawtayne” cried the boatswain, rushing aft, “the water comes in upon us apace. The waves have driven in the sail wherewith we strove to stop the hole.” As he spoke the seamen came swarming onto the poop and the

forecastle to avoid the torrent which poured through the huge leak into the waist. High above the roar of the wind and the clash of the sea rose the shrill half-human cries of the horses, as they found the water rising rapidly around them.

“Stop it from without!” cried Hawtayne, seizing the end of the wet sail with which the gap had been plugged. “Speedily, my hearts, or we are gone!” Swiftly they rove ropes to the corners, and then, rushing forward to the bows, they lowered them under the keel, and drew them tight in such a way that the sail should cover the outer face of the gap. The force of the rush of water was checked by this obstacle, but it still squirted plentifully from every side of it. At the sides the horses were above the belly, and in the centre a man from the poop could scarce touch the deck with a seven foot spear. The cog lay lower in the water and the waves splashed freely over the weather bulwark.

“I fear that we can scarce bide upon this tack” cried Hawtayne; “and yet the other will drive us on the rocks.”

“Might we not haul down sail and wait for better times?” suggested Sir Nigel.

“Nay, we should drift upon the rocks. Thirty years have I been on the sea, and never yet in greater straits. Yet we are in the hands of the Saints.”

“Of whom” cried Sir Oliver “I look more particularly to St. James of Compostella, who hath already befriended us this day, and on whose feast I hereby vow that I shall eat a second carp, if he will but interpose a second time.”

The wrack had thickened to seaward, and the coast was but a blurred line. Two vague shadows in the offing showed where the galeasses rolled and tossed upon the great Atlantic rollers. Hawtayne looked wistfully in their direction.

“If they would but lie closer we might find safety, even should the cog founder. You will bear me out with good Master Witherton of Southampton that I have done all that a shipman might. It would be well that you should doff camail and greaves, Sir Nigel, for, by the black rood! It is like enough that we shall have to swim for it.”

“Nay” said the little knight “it would be scarce fitting that a cavalier should throw off his harness for the fear of every puff of wind and puddle of water. I would rather that my Company should gather round me here on the poop, where we might abide together whatever God may be pleased to send. But, certes, Master Hawtayne, for all that my sight is none of the best, it is not the first time that I have seen that headland upon the left.”

The seaman shaded his eyes with his hand, and gazed earnestly through the haze and spray. Suddenly he threw up his arms and shouted aloud in his joy.

“‘Tis the point of La Tremblade!” he cried. “I had not thought that we were as far as Oleron. The Gironde lies before us, and once over the bar, and under

shelter of the Tour de Cordouan, all will be well with us. Veer again, my hearts, and bring her to try with the main course!”

The sail swung round once more, and the cog, battered and torn and well nigh waterlogged, staggered in for this haven of refuge. A bluff cape to the north and a long spit to the south marked the mouth of the noble river, with a low lying island of silted sand in the centre, all shrouded and curtained by the spume of the breakers. A line of broken water traced the dangerous bar, which in clear day and balmy weather has cracked the back of many a tall ship.

“There is a channel” said Hawtayne, “which was shown to me by the Prince’s own pilot. Mark yonder tree upon the bank, and see the tower which rises behind it. If these two be held in a line, even as we hold them now, it may be done, though our ship draws two good ells more than when she put forth.”

“God speed you, Master Hawtayne!” cried Sir Oliver. “Twice have we come scathless out of peril, and now for the third time I commend me to the blessed James of Compostella, to whom I vow —”

“Nay, nay, old friend” whispered Sir Nigel. “You are like to bring a judgment upon us with these vows, which no living man could accomplish. Have I not already heard you vow to eat two carp in one day, and now you would venture upon a third?”

“I pray you that you will order the Company to lie down” cried Hawtayne, who had taken the tiller and was gazing ahead with a fixed eye. “In three minutes we shall either be lost or in safety.”

Archers and seamen lay flat upon the deck, waiting in stolid silence for whatever fate might come. Hawtayne bent his weight upon the tiller, and crouched to see under the bellying sail. Sir Oliver and Sir Nigel stood erect with hands crossed in front of the poop. Down swooped the great cog into the narrow channel which was the portal to safety. On either bow roared the shallow bar. Right ahead one small lane of black swirling water marked the pilot’s course. But true was the eye and firm the hand which guided. A dull scraping came from beneath, the vessel quivered and shook, at the waist, at the quarter, and behind sounded that grim roaring of the waters, and with a plunge the yellow cog was over the bar and speeding swiftly up the broad and tranquil estuary of the Gironde.