

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 river-side 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.

Geoffrey Vickars had been somewhat severely wounded upon the last day of the struggle in the cellar, a Spanish officer having beaten down his guard and cleft through his morion. Lionel was unwounded, but the fatigue and excitement had told upon him greatly, and soon after they arrived at Bergen Captain Vere advised both of them to return home for a few months.

"There is nothing likely to be doing here until the spring. Parma has a more serious matter in hand. They talk, you know, of invading England, and after his experience at Sluys I do not

think he will be wasting his force by knocking their heads against stone walls. I should be glad if I could return too, but I have my company to look after and must remain where I am ordered; but as you are but volunteers and giving your service at your pleasure, and are not regularly upon the list of the pages of the company, I can undertake to grant you leave, and indeed I can see that you both greatly need rest. You have begun well and have both done good service, and have been twice thanked by the governor of Sluys and Sir Roger Williams.

"You will do yourselves no good by being shut up through the winter in this dull town, and as there is a vessel lying by the quay which is to set sail tomorrow, I think you cannot do better than go in her. I will give you letters to my cousin and your father saying how well you have borne yourselves, and how mightily Sir Roger Williams was pleased with you. In the spring you can rejoin, unless indeed the Spaniards should land in England, which Heaven forbid, in which case you will probably prefer to ride under my cousin's banner at home."

The boys gladly accepted Francis Vere's proposal. It was but three months since they had set foot in Holland, but they had gone through a tremendous experience, and the thought of being shut up for eight or nine months at Bergen-op-Zoom was by no means a pleasant one. Both felt worn out and exhausted, and longed for the fresh keen air of the eastern coast. Therefore the next morning they embarked on board ship. Captain Vere presented them each with a handsome brace of pistols in token of his regard, and Captains Uvedale, Baskerville, and other officers who were intimate friends of Vere's, and had met them at his quarters, gave them handsome presents in recognition of the services they had rendered at Sluys.

The ship was bound for Harwich, which was the nearest English port. Landing there, they took passage by boat to

Manningtree and thence by horse home, where they astounded their father and mother by their sudden appearance.

"And this is what comes of your soldiering," Mrs. Vickars said when the first greeting was over. "Here is Geoffrey with plasters all over the side of his head, and you, Lionel, looking as pale and thin as if you had gone through a long illness. I told your father when we heard of your going that you ought to be brought back and whipped; but the earl talked him over into writing to Captain Francis to tell him that he approved of this mad-brained business, and a nice affair it has turned out."

"You will not have to complain of our looks, mother, at the end of a week or two," Geoffrey said. "My wound is healing fast, and Lionel only needs an extra amount of sleep for a time. You see, for nearly a month we were never in bed, but just lay down to sleep by the side of Captain Vere on the top of the ramparts, where we had been fighting all day.

"It was a gallant defence," Mr. Vickars said, "and all England is talking of it. It was wonderful that 800 English and as many Dutchmen should hold a weak place for two months against full twelve times their number of Spaniards, led by the Duke of Parma himself, and there is great honour for all who took part in the defence. The governor and Sir Roger Williams especially mentioned Francis Vere as among the bravest and best of their captains, and although you as pages can have had nought to do with the fighting, you will have credit as serving under his banner."

"I think, father," Geoffrey said, touching the plasters on his head, "this looks somewhat as if we had had something to do with the fighting, and here is a letter for you from Captain Vere which will give you some information about it."

Mr. Vickars adjusted his horn spectacles on his face and opened the letter. It began:

"My dear Master and Friend, —I have had no means of writing to you since your letter came to me, having had other matters in mind, and being cut off from all communication with England. I was glad to find that you did not take amiss my carrying off of your sons. Indeed that action has turned out more happily than might have been expected, for I own that they were but young for such rough service.

"However, they have proved themselves valiant young gentlemen. They fought stoutly by my side during our long tussle with the Spaniards, and more than once saved my life by ridding me of foes who would have taken me at a disadvantage. Once, indeed, when I was down from a blow on the pate from a Spanish axe, they rushed forward and kept my assailants at bay until rescue came. They discovered a plot between a traitor in the town and the Spaniards, and succeeded in defeating his plans and bringing him to justice.

"They were also the means of preventing the Spaniards from breaking into the great wine-cellars and capturing the warehouses, and for each of these services they received the thanks of the Dutch governor and of Sir Roger Williams, our leader. Thus, you see, although so young they have distinguished themselves mightily, and should aught befall me, there are many among my friends who will gladly take them under their protection and push them forward. I have sent them home for a time to have quiet and rest, which they need after their exertions, and have done this the more willingly since there is no chance of fighting for many months to come. I hope that before the Spaniards again advance against us I may have them by my side."

"Well, well, this is wonderful," Mrs. Vickars said when her husband had finished reading the letter. "If they had told me themselves I should not have believed them, although they have never been given to the sin of lying; but since it is writ in

Master Vere's own hand it cannot be doubted. And now tell us all about it, boys."

"We will tell you when we have had dinner, mother. This brisk Essex air has given us both an appetite, and until that is satisfied you must excuse us telling a long story. Is the earl at the castle, father? because we have two letters to him from Captain Francis—one, I believe, touching our affairs, and the other on private matters. We have also letters from him to his mother and his brother John, and these we had better send off at once by a messenger, as also the private letters to the earl."

"That I will take myself," Mr. Vickars said. "I was just going up to him to speak about my parish affairs when you arrived."

"You had better have your dinner first," Mrs. Vickars said decidedly. "When you once get with the earl and begin talking you lose all account of the time, and only last week kept dinner waiting for two hours. It is half past eleven now, and I will hurry it on so that it will be ready a few minutes before noon."

"Very well, my dear; but I will go out into the village at once and find a messenger to despatch to Crepping Hall with the letters to Dame Elizabeth and John Vere."

The boys' story was not told until after supper, for as soon as dinner was over Mr. Vickars went up to the castle with the letters for the earl. The latter, after reading them, told him that his cousin spoke most highly of his two sons, and said they had been of great service, even as far as the saving of his life. The earl told Mr. Vickars to bring the boys up next day to see him in order that he might learn a full account of the fighting at Sluys, and that he hoped they would very often come in, and would, while they were at home, practise daily with his master of arms at the castle. "I know, Mr. Vickars, that you had hoped that one of them would enter the church; but you

see that their tastes lie not in that direction, and it is evident that, as in the case of my cousin Francis, they are cut out for soldiers."

"I am afraid so," Mr. Vickars said; "and must let them have their own way, for I hold, that none should be forced to follow the ministry save those whose natural bent lies that way."

"I don't think they have chosen badly," the earl said. "My cousin Francis bids fair to make a great soldier, and as they start in life as his pages they will have every chance of getting on, and I warrant me that Francis will push their fortunes. Perhaps I may be able to aid them somewhat myself. If aught comes of this vapouring of the Spaniards, before the boys return to Holland, they shall ride with me. I am already arming all the tenantry and having them practised in warlike exercises, and in the spring I shall fit out two ships at Harwich to join the fleet that will put to sea should the Spaniards carry out their threats of invading us."

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOSS OF THE "SUSAN."

There were few people in Hedingham more pleased to see the two lads on their return than John Lirriper, to whom they paid a visit on the first day they went out.

"I am glad to see you back, young masters; though, to say the truth, you are not looking nigh so strong and well as you did when I last parted from you."

"We shall soon be all right again, John. We have had rather a rough time of it over there in Sluys."

"Ah, so I have heard tell, Master Geoffrey. Your father read out from the pulpit a letter the earl had received from Captain Francis telling about the fighting, and it mentioned that you were both alive and well and had done good service; but it was only a short letter sent off in haste the day after he and the others had got out of the town. I was right glad when I heard it, I can tell you, for there had been nought talked of here but the siege; and though your lady mother has not said much to me, I always held myself ready to slip round the corner or into a house when I saw her come down the street, for I knew well enough what was in her mind. She was just saying to herself, 'John Lirriper, if it hadn't been for you my two boys would not be in peril now. If aught comes to them, it will be your doing.' And though it was not my fault, as far

as I could see, for Captain Francis took you off my hands, as it were, and I had no more to say in the matter than a child, still, there it was, and right glad was I when I heard that the siege was over and you were both alive.

"I had a bad time of it, I can tell you, when I first got back, young sirs, for your mother rated me finely; and though your father said it was not my fault in any way, she would not listen to him, but said she had given you into my charge, and that I had no right to hand you over to any others save with your father's permission—not if it were to the earl himself,—and for a long time after she would make as if she didn't see me if she met me in the street. When my wife was ill about that time she sent down broths and simples to her, but she sent them by one of the maids, and never came herself save when she knew I was away in my boat.

"However, the day after the reading of that letter she came in and said she was sorry she had treated me hardly, and that she had known at heart all along that it was not altogether my fault, and asked my pardon as nice as if I had been the earl. Of course I said there was nothing to ask pardon for, and indeed that I thought it was only natural she should have blamed me, for that I had often blamed myself, though not seeing how I could have done otherwise. However, I was right glad when the matter was made up, for it is not pleasant for a man when the parson's wife sets herself against him."

"It was certainly hard upon you, John," Geoffrey said; "but I am sure our mother does not in any way blame you now. You see, we brought home letters from Captain Vere, or rather Sir Francis, for he has been knighted now, and he was good enough to speak very kindly of what we were able to do in the siege. Mother did not say much, but I am sure that at heart she is very grateful, for the earl himself came down to the Rectory and spoke warmly about us, and said that he should

always be our fast friend, because we had given his cousin some help when he was roughly pressed by the Spaniards. I hope we shall have another sail with you in a short time, for we are not going back to the Netherlands at present, as things are likely to be quiet there now. Although he did not say so, I think Sir Francis thought that we were over-young for such rough work, and would be more useful in a year's time; for, you see, in these sieges even pages have to take their share in the fighting, and when it comes to push of pike with the Spaniards more strength and vigour are needed than we possess at present. So we are to continue our practice at arms at the castle, and to take part in the drilling of the companies the earl is raising in case the Spaniards carry out their threat of invading England."

Mrs. Vickars offered no objection whatever the first time Geoffrey asked permission to go down to Bricklesey with John Lirriper.

"I have no objection, Geoffrey; and, indeed, now that you have chosen your own lives and are pages to Sir Francis Vere, it seems to me that in matters of this kind you can judge for yourself. Now that you have taken to soldiering and have borne your part in a great siege, and have even yourselves fought with the Spaniards, I deem it that you have got beyond my wing, and must now act in all small matters as it pleases you; and that since you have already run great danger of your lives, and may do so again ere long, it would be folly of me to try to keep you at my apron-strings and to treat you as if you were still children."

So the two lads often accompanied John Lirriper to Bricklesey, and twice sailed up the river to London and back in Joe Chambers' smack, these jaunts furnishing a pleasant change to their work of practising with pike and sword with the men-at-arms at the castle, or learning the words of command and the work of officers in drilling the newly raised corps. One

day John Lirriper told them that his nephew was this time going to sail up the Medway to Rochester, and would be glad to take them with him if they liked it; for they were by this time prime favourites with the master of the *Susan*. Although their mother had told them that they were at liberty to go as they pleased, they nevertheless always made a point of asking permission before they went away.

"If the wind is fair we shall not be long away on this trip, mother. Two days will take us up to Rochester; we shall be a day loading there, and shall therefore be back on Saturday if the wind serves, and may even be sooner if the weather is fine and we sail with the night tides, as likely enough we shall, for the moon is nearly full, and there will be plenty of light to keep our course free of the sands."

The permission was readily given. Mrs. Vickars had come to see that it was useless to worry over small matters, and therefore nodded cheerfully, and said she would give orders at once for a couple of chickens to be killed and other provision prepared for their voyage.

"I do not doubt you are going to have a rougher voyage than usual this time, young masters," John Lirriper said when the boat was approaching Bricklesey. "The sky looks wild, and I think there is going to be a break in the weather. However, the *Susan* is a stout boat, and my nephew a careful navigator."

"I should like a rough voyage for a change, John," Geoffrey said. "We have always had still water and light winds on our trips, and I should like a good blow."

"Well, I think you will have one; though may be it will only come on thick and wet. Still I think there is wind in those clouds, and that if it does come it will be from the south-east, in which case you will have a sharp buffeting. But you will make good passage enough down to the Nore once you are fairly round the Whittaker."

"Glad to see you, young masters," Joe Chambers said, as the boat came alongside his craft. "You often grumbled at the light winds, but unless I am mistaken we shall be carrying double reefs this journey. What do you think, Uncle John?"

"I have been saying the same, lad; still there is no saying. You will know more about it in a few hours' time."

It was evening when the boys went on board the *Susan*, and as soon as supper was over they lay down, as she was to start at daybreak the next morning. As soon as they were roused by the creaking of the blocks and the sound of trampling of feet overhead they went up on deck. Day had just broken; the sky was overspread by dark clouds.

"There is not much wind after all," Geoffrey said as he looked round.

"No, it has fallen light during the last two hours," the skipper replied, "but I expect we shall have plenty before long. However, we could do with a little more now."

Tide was half out when they started. Joe Chambers had said the night before that he intended to drop down to the edge of the sands and there anchor, and to make across them past the Whittaker Beacon into the channel as soon as there was sufficient water to enable him to do so. The wind was light, sometimes scarcely sufficient to belly out the sails and give the boat steerage way, at others coming in short puffs which heeled her over and made her spring forward merrily.

Before long the wind fell lighter and lighter, and at last Joe Chambers ordered the oars to be got out.

"We must get down to the edge of the Buxey," he said, "before the tide turns, or we shall have it against us, and with this wind we should never be able to stem it, but should be swept up the Crouch. At present it is helping us, and with a couple of hours' rowing we may save it to the Buxey."

The boys helped at the sweeps, and for two hours the

creaking of the oars and the dull flapping of the sail alone broke the silence of the calm; and the lads were by no means sorry when the skipper gave the order for the anchor to be dropped.

"I should like to have got about half a mile further," he said; "but I can see by the landmarks that we are making no way now. The tide is beginning to suck in."

"How long will it be before we have water enough to cross the Spit?" Lionel asked as they laid in the oars.

"Well nigh four hours, Master Lionel. Then, even if it keeps a stark calm like this, we shall be able to get across the sands and a mile or two up the channel before we meet the tide. There we must anchor again till the first strength is past, and then if the wind springs up we can work along at the edge of the sands against it. There is no tide close in to the sands after the first two hours. But I still think this is going to turn into wind presently; and if it does it will be sharp and heavy, I warrant. It's either that or rain."

The sky grew darker and darker until the water looked almost black under a leaden canopy.

"I wish we were back into Bricklesey," Joe Chambers said. "I have been well nigh fifteen years going backwards and forwards here, and I do not know that ever I saw an awkwarder look about the sky. It reminds me of what I have heard men who have sailed to the Indies say they have seen there before a hurricane breaks. If it was not that we saw the clouds flying fast overhead when we started, I should have said it was a thick sea fog that had rolled in upon us. Ah, there is the first drop. I don't care how hard it comes down so that there is not wind at the tail of it. A squall of wind before rain is soon over; but when it follows rain you will soon have your sails close-reefed. You had best go below or you will be wet through in a minute."

The great drops were pattering down on the deck and causing