

CHAPTER IX.**THE WAR TIMES, THE PRESS-GANG, AND THE HEROES AND HEROINES OF THE SEA.**

And so the end of the century came to us, as we see, in darkness and sorrow. Surely it was as the gathering night to the joyful birth, when the rising hopes were like sunlight on sea and shore, but which one by one had disappeared, before what, in many an eye, were the shadows of despair. Hunger and hardship were already ever widening, ever blackening by the mariner's hearth, where women and children were also weeping for the comfort and joy lost for ever in the storm, or in the battle that was rolling afar. The harbour, the avenue of fisher life, was deserted by all but seven, and not always seven weary crews, the symbol of the shore being but too truthfully the bulwark, and that old man sitting on the broken mast, musing alone on the memories, the fading memories of other and happier years.

But our century is born, "and how shall we welcome the stranger?" We repeat the question as it drops almost at the natal hour from the Parliamenter, Sir John, at the grand supper to his constituents, the Town Council, in the dingy old Tolbooth. It is a great occasion, and he spoke like the friend of Pitt concerning Napoleon, as the evil star that had risen to embroil and desolate Europe, and that his sympathisers at the door, the "Black Nebs," as he contemptuously calls them, were the enemies, not of their country only, but of mankind. He filled in, or rather coloured the picture of the times, and concluded by calling upon his enthusiastic hearers to remember the glorious traditions of their country, and if

need were to draw the sword to uphold and defend the right, till the God of battles, who was with them, would establish victory and peace on the downfall and ruin of their enemies.

"Grand speech," hiccuped the landward Bailie on the Tolbooth stair. "It's easy speakin'," curtly responds a brother of the sea—the flickering oil lamp at the moment betraying the bitter look on his honest face. And no marvel that it was so, for within the last four-and-twenty hours his brother and his sister's son had been seized, the one by the press-gang, who had attacked the house at midnight, and the other by the gun brig, which lay disguised like a collier in the offing.

He was not alone, however, in his anger and grief; on the contrary, on that night, and all through the twenty years of the hot French war, impressment in the King's ships was the scourge and terror of the coast—the press-gang, in short, being more feared than the tempest or the raging sea. Party politics, it is true, might and did secure the privileged few, as in the case of the Town Councillor, by certificate or "protection;" but as a rule the blockade runner was never more alert and watchful than the fishers of Fife at their lawful calling against the surprise by the cruizers specially appointed for the defence of the coast. The fisher had in the rising breeze perhaps little to fear, for the smartest frigate or cutter in the service was no match for his trim little boat, just as on the bleak autumn day the old commodore, in pity for their forlorn situation, as he thought, hailed the Cellardyke crew, "I'll heave to, men, and give you a convoy under close-reefed topsails to the land." "Aye, aye, sir," cried little Skipper Murray, with a quiet laugh, as he and the crew worked the fishing gear, when, "the last end" on board, the race began. The old commodore was proud of his corvette, as you could see by his walk on the quarter deck; but he turns and stops, when

there, sitting right in the wind's eye, the little craft skims away on the waters like a sea bird on the wing. At his quick order busy hands are on the reef points, and the broad sail springs up the mast. The topgallant sails also curl and fly from the yards till "sheet home" rings far over the sea. The royals also tug at the lefty mast, and yet after all the boat is not to be overhauled, but sinks into a speck far on the weather bow. "There it comes at last, men," said Skipper Murray, as the wind sweeps down from the west; he is unshipping the rudder at the bulwark, as he says so; but it was not for another ten days or more that the corvette, caught far to leeward by the gale, was able to cast anchor in the rendezvous at Leith Roads. The tale, however, had another turn in slanting winds or a sudden calm, when an armed pinnace or shotted gun would place an iron hand on the collar of the best and bravest of the crew, who would in this way go out in the morning, but would not return till years of absence on a foreign station, or a French prison as it might chance to be—that is to say, if he returned at all, which many a husband and father, alas! never did in that long and bloody war.

But the press-gang was more hated than all, for the sailors so employed were usually the most reckless in the ship, who, fired with drink and armed to the teeth, would steal into the town at midnight, and attack the houses like the onslaught of robbers or pirates. They were also in league with secret spies, who chalked the door of an intended victim. Is resistance possible? It is not; and the unfortunate mariner is dragged away by the drunken ruffians, who have struck down the poor wife and the children, clinging to him in their anguish and despair. At times, however, a different reception is in wait for them. A friendly scout has advertised the coming, and the inhabitants, true to the heroic old days, when the

Laird of Wemyss and the fishers of Fife routed the English, as one to five on the brae above St Monance kirk, rose to the danger, and more than once the officer and his crew have been seen flying through the gullet at the old East Green with showers of stones pelting at their heels, the ready artillery of the wives of Cellardyke, with gown tails well filled from the sea beach ; or, again, it has been the fishers and their boat hooks bearing down all before them, like the Scottish spearsmen in the wars of "Wallace wight." Stratagem is also tried, and in the necessities of their situation every house, as in the smuggling days with its "gin or brandy hide," has now its secret recess or trap-door, now cunningly contrived under the bed clothes ; now under that big chest in the dark corner, by which, like the subterranean passage of a besieged castle, the hardy fisher could at a moment's notice retreat from the enemy.

Conflicts like these are more harassing than the winter storm, because they have to be wedged, not now and then, but in all times and seasons. Yet after all there is another and a more indiscriminate enemy sitting like the wolf at the open door. Here is a suggestive anecdote to illustrate our meaning :—A few years later a Cellardyke boat is weathering the then desolate Inchcape reef, when one of the crew complained of the long and hazardous sea, and the little recompense that came by it. "Don't grumble, David," said the old skipper—"don't grumble, your father and I have parted coppers many a day."

They had brave Scottish hearts, however, these old fisher folk, and knew how to meet and conquer in the battle.

There was an orphan household with three sisters, "as bonnie strappin' lasses as in Cellardyke," said our dear old friend, but with a single Sunday gown amongst them. In

this dilemma the prized garment was worn by the sister whose turn and privilege it was every third Sabbath to go to the church; but they were contented rather to have it so than be indebted to any one, and thus to wait and suffer, sustained by the hope, which did not fail, "God," they said, will help us to kindlier days.

Here is another peep into the inner life of the heroic past:—In order to sweeten the long and irksome hours in the days of the hand-wrought net, the young women of Cellardyke would assemble in a neighbour's to ply the busy needle. A favourite trysting-place was a house near the Urquhart Wynd, inhabited by a widow and her two daughters, who earned their livelihood by what to their companions was little else than the occupation of an idle hour. The little party, of course, broke up at meal time, when the others went home to the comforts of the tea table, but with the widow's household there was only the solace of a dry crust and water as it came from the spring; yet rather than that any human eye should see or suspect the sacrifice which they made for an honest upholding, a wet cup was taken to daub and sprinkle the table as if they also had enjoyed their own full share of the dainties of life.

But here we have the secret of the strengthened courage of the sea-side homes of Fife.

The aged mother of one of the sufferers towards the close of the century was left with the snows of eighty on her venerable head without a friend or stay in this world. She inhabited a cold and cheerless apartment, in which even, in the dead of winter, she could scarcely find fuel for a fire. Still, she was content to suffer rather than to beg or let her wants be known; but one day the parish minister, James Forrester, called to see her. He looked around him, the north wind was

keen and sharp, but the hearth was cold and desolate. "Have you nothing left of comfort?" said the minister, touched to the heart with pity. "Oh, aye, sir, there's the back-door and the promises," answered the old saint, her eyes brimming and beaming with tears, as she referred to the sanctuary where she so often knelt and prayed in the abiding peace and joy in "Our Father which art in Heaven."

A period of fully five years elapsed after the disaster of 1800 before another catastrophe darkened the homes of Cellardyke. At the time the big boats were reserved for the drave, or perhaps the "kellin lines," while the haddock fishery was plied by a class of swift but trusty yawls like the St Monance fishers of later years. It was on the 24th of June 1805 that one of the nine boats so employed from Cellardyke was seen and recognised from the famous outlook, the Castle-yard of Crail. She was the "Nancy," owned by the brothers, Alexander & Thomas Scott, and was in full sail for home, when it disappeared like a snow-flake on the face of the waters. We were once in the same deadly peril. Worn out by the toils of the morning, and seduced by the heat of the day, we had fallen into a kind of waking slumber, which had also overpowered our helmsman, when we were suddenly aroused by the strange wild voices of wind and waters. The black squall was upon us, and each one asleep and careless at his post; and now, high on the weather side, we look down on the lee wale buried in the green sea, in which pale faces were upturned to Heaven, but so sadly, so sorrowfully, as if they only thought of home and children, naked and desolate for ever. We escaped, but on that fatal day not one was left to tell how six brave men met their fate. The death record is—Alexander Scott, who left a widow and four children; Thomas Scott, who had a wife and two daughters; James

Morris, who left a widow and six children, cast on the mercy of Providence ; and three young unmarried men, named David Rhynd, David Wilson, and James Watson.

They lie buried in the deep, except Alexander Scott, whose corpse was seen at sea a few days after the accident, but only recovered five weeks later by the Earl of Kellie's fisher at Fifeness, when it was laid with kindred dust hard by the ancient Lykegate of Kilrenny.

The next casualty, if less disastrous, was akin to the former. It occurred on a harvest morning in the offing of Caiplie ; but all escaped except a gallant youth, named Leslie Brown, whose father and grandfather, as we have seen, also shared a watery grave.

An extraordinary incident here claims a place in our narrative. When overset by the squall the boat, which was named the "Brothers" of Cellardyke, rapidly filled and sank ; but in the all-terrible excitement of the moment Robert Anderson had the singular presence of mind to unclasp the knife and cut the lines which entangled him to the wreck. He returned the knife half shut to its place in his jacket, which he next threw off to swim for his life ; but so vividly had his every act been stamped upon his memory that the knife was found in the pocket as he said when the jacket was raised with the boat in the course of the following week.

Our mournful chronicle and the interval has nothing on which to dwell, but carries us down to the closing day of the eventful year 1814. The occasion is the Burntisland herring fishery, or the famous "up the water drave ;" but before proceeding with the narrative let us briefly refer to an enterprise so much entwined with the fisher life of the Fife coast. The fishery began in 1793, but twenty years before the sea so swarmed with herrings that, according to the story, an old

sailor once dipped his mainsail into Inverkeithing bay to wash away the coal dust, and to his surprise and delight caught them in dozens in the folds of the canvass. The East Neuk laughed at the yarn ; but the cunning fisher of Donibristle, Tam Brown, knew and kept the secret ; he even cast aside hook and line to dip and fish the herring with a pail, till his neighbours at last set watch and detected his selfish trick, which, coming to the ears of the starving fishers of Queensferry, led to the first trial at the time in question with the net. The discovery thus made flew, as good news always fly, along the coast, and so, while some were incredulous in Cellardyke, "too good news to be true," they said, others hastened to the Braehead to fasten rope and yarn, and then hied away, with the same ardour as their grandchildren in recent years, to the gold fields of Australia. The herrings were in boatloads, but the price was often only half-a-crown a barrel ; but next winter and next such fleets of Greenock smacks and Irish wherries came through the canal that the market rose to half-a-guinea, and in later years to more than a guinea a cran. It was new life to the shore, as it enabled the household to rise above the calamity of a luckless Lammas drave, or it might be to retrieve the misfortunes of the last Greenland voyage ; and if all did not, and do not, draw prizes in the sea lottery, still in some cases, at least, the "up the water drave" proved the "nest egg" of after prosperity and riches. In 1814, to which our narrative refers, the chances of the sea had been rather discouraging ; but the Elie packet had brought down good news on the Saturday, and accordingly every crew that could muster was up and away on Monday morning. It was a strong wind from the westward, but boat after boat was gallantly weathering the stream, when about a mile to leeward of Inchkeith one of them was caught and upset by a sudden squall.

The ferry boat was at once to the rescue, and a strong swimmer is saved, but his young companion sinks as the friendly rope falls on his shoulder. A death grasp is on some floating wreck, and the corpse of the skipper was recovered. This was David Roger, who, with his noble boy George, and a fine young man named Thomas Watson, are the victims of this fatal voyage.

The only survivor is Thomas Smith, whose life story has an interest and pathos all its own. While a lad of fifteen he had stood on Cellardyke pier and heard the death cry and seen the last wrestle of his poor father in the awful tragedy of 1800. He himself had been a castaway in the midnight wreck of the Leith smack near Stonehaven, when all on board had perished on the stormy lee, and when he had also been taken for a bruised corpse by the lady that chance, or rather Providence, had sent, she knew not why, that morning to the lonely shore. This remarkable man was spared to the patriarchal age of four score and four—his death taking place on the 19th of March 1869.

The boat, which had been built but a short time before by Bailie Paton, of Anstruther, was recovered, but was subsequently lost with all hands while fishing years after from Pittenweem. David Rodger left an orphan household of five sons and three daughters; but his widow, Elizabeth Watson, was one of those heroines who rise to struggle when others would sink in despair. She wept away the tears in the sweet and abiding promise of Him who says, "I am with thee," and so wrought and sacrificed, but surely not in vain, even on this side of the river. David, at nineteen, became from that day the breadwinner of the family, while his four younger brothers—Alexander, James, Thomas, and Robert—took in time to shipboard, and before she died the widow had the pride and

pleasure of seeing one and all in command of foreign-going ships.

Had this misfortune occurred a year earlier, the fishing fleet of Cellardyke would not have numbered so many as Sir Robert Sibbald saw it a hundred years before; but at this time many an old face had returned to the bulwarks that had been a stranger for many a year. These were the sailors who had been so ruthlessly dragged away by the press-gang, but who, nevertheless, had done their duty with the bravest, whether in the battle or the storm; who had seen Nelson's glorious watchword, and sent back an answering cheer in the thunder of Trafalgar; or who had also fought and bled in the thousand conflicts which had made the "meteor flag" the terror and glory of the seas.

It was a proud privilege to be a listener by the old pier in these days. Here is one, for instance, telling an ancient crony of his last year's herring cruise at Wick, perhaps as one of the five hands of Thomas Cunningham's drave boat, the "Jennet," a staunch and serviceable craft, though scarcely eight-and-twenty feet of keel. "What gear did ye carry?" asks the friend. "Oh, three nets to a man—one fifty yards and the other two forty yards long, but all fifteen score deep;" and then, perchance, would follow the usual bitter complaint about the dearth of the times, which had raised the pound of hemp to the ransom price of a shilling—the spinning of the same to sixpence and the laying to threepence. "Oor folk wroucht my new net," the speaker would continue, but he would tell his friend that the ordinary rate when others had to be employed was sixpence the yard or the half pound of hemp—that is to say, when the worker was to be paid by weight instead of by the measure. The conversation would then likely conclude with a reference to the success of the drave, in which some

boats had fished and others had not fished their complement of two hundred barrels—the price having advanced that year from eight shillings to ten shillings a barrel. At another corner, perchance, the talk is about the increasing size of the boats, and the last addition is emphatically pointed to on the beach. She is the leviathan of the coast at a length of twenty-nine feet, but old David Birrel, who is accepted as one of the best authorities in Cellardyke, has given his unreserved opinion after walking round and round the new craft, “She’s too big, I say, either to row or sail.”

Here some passing incident has thrown the “crack” into another channel, and reference is next made to the forlorn state of the cooper trade. Now that the herrings had forsaken the old haunts of Fife, and perhaps to an inquiry after Robert Tod or John Darsie, the reply would be that like his neighbours he had taken to a West India or Greenland voyage, seeing that, like Othello, “his occupation was gone.” In all probability one of the group would tell us something very singular, that he could recollect when Bailie William Russell had cured two hundred barrels, as he did on the Lammas of 1802, at the Brae of Anstruther. But the group is never so large or so closely drawn under the lea of the “craw skellie,” nor is the interest so deep and all absorbing, as when the returned warriors fight their battles o’er again. And little marvel it is so remembering what they have to tell of flood and field. Here, for instance, is the life sketch of one. It is dark-haired David Wilson, who has come on the errand of love to Cellardyke. This hero was born in the ever-memorable year 1792 at Brownhills, by the glorious sea shore of St Andrews. His father, a fine specimen of the Scottish cottar, was foreman on the farm; but the “hairst rig” or the green knowes, had no charms for the dark-haired

herd-boy as compared with the flashing main, with the ships coming and going like "things of life and light;" and so one evening, when only twelve years of age, he left his father's roof-tree to begin life as a sailor. His first floating home was the little bluff Kirkcaldy smack, the "Maggie Lauder," which in these days was thought big enough to charter to London; but though no drudge or dog is kicked about like the cabin boy of a coaster, David stuck with a hero's heart to his first love till by a lucky chance he improved his situation on board an over sea trading brig belonging to Dunbar. While voyaging in his craft he was one stormy day thrown from the top-gallant yard into the sea, where he manfully buffeted for a weary hour and a quarter with the hungry billows before he could be rescued, more dead than alive; but notwithstanding all such stern experience and still more his mother's melting tears, the young rover remained true to old Neptune, and on the first opportunity extended his voyages by joining the gallant old "Advice" of Dundee in a whaling cruise to Greenland. These were the stirring days of the French war and the press-gang, when the British sailors had often as much reason to fear a friend as a foe, and so it happened one September day with the crew of the old Tay whaler, who, instead of the wistfully watched-for hills of Scotland, saw the dreaded war brig "Pickle" lurking like a wolf in their track. David Wilson and his comrades did not need to be told her errand, and, as the only hope of escape, the old ship was instantly trimmed under all sail right before the freshening breeze. As quickly up flew top-gallant and studding sail on the brig, which followed in the chase like a hound at the heels of a wild boar, as the rising gale swelled the broad mainsail of the old hulk till tack and sheet snapped again, and her huge sides were fairly buried in

foam and spray, and yet after all her fleet pursuer proudly ranged alongside. "Round to," thundered the captain through his speaking trumpet from the quarterdeck; but David, who was at the helm, only grasped the wheel with a firmer hold, and, with "no surrender" stamped on every feature of his manly face, kept the ship steady on her course, while the seamen, handspike in hand, by way of *ruse*, drove the honest-hearted St Monance master and the other officers into the cabin, to save them from the serious consequence of disobeying orders from a king's ship. Being thus defied, the brig was next steered across the bows of the whaler, as if to bar her further flight, but on swept the whaleship like a maddened bull, straight to the assault, and the cruiser's helm was put down just in time to avert the collision. "Round to, or I'll sink you," again thundered from the quarterdeck; but even the ship boy, fired with the wild enthusiasm of the moment, waved defiance from the yard-arm. The insulted Captain was furious with rage, and the shotted guns were opened upon the fugitive ship. "Whizz, whizz," flew the deadly shower, but the courageous steersman never flinched from his post. Though one bullet and then another struck the spoke from his hand, he as quickly seized another, and kept the gallant old craft bounding before the blast till sail and rigging was riddled by cannon shot, and the disabled hulk lay at the mercy of the war brig, who completed the capture at the point of the cutlass. The intrepid steersman was, of course, regarded as the head mutineer, and as such was treated, or rather ill-used, by the commander, who appears to have been quite unworthy of the uniform of Nelson or Collingwood. He was ordered under irons till he and his comrades could be tried for mutiny on the high seas, for so the *ruse* on Captain Adamson of the "Advice" was held to be, and with this terrible purpose the brig was now

steered for the Thames. David also incurred the unbridled vengeance of the Captain by refusing to answer certain questions which would have established the serious crime with which he was charged, and the poor sailor lay day and night with a six-foot iron bar across his legs, and his hands rivetted to the ring bolts, but in this woeful plight he one day found a true and unexpected friend. This was one of the brig's crew who sheltered his fallen head as a London lawyer in the King's service, and who had just been punished for some misconduct by the Captain, towards whom, in consequence, he cherished the bitterest hate. By the counsel of this new friend, the simple young mariner pled so well before the court in London, that he was held to be innocent of mutiny, but at the same time he was forced to enter the King's service on board the "Pickle," though he had the satisfaction to see his enemy, the Captain, cashiered for cruelty and a course of conduct unworthy a British officer. On board the war-brig David was so distinguished as a brave and expert sailor that he was in a fair way of obtaining promotion through the high opinion of his officers, when he and his boat's company resolved to desert the ship, which he accordingly did one night at Jersey, where he also joined a packet holding a letter of marque and trading to the Mediterranean. While crossing the Bay of Biscay the vessel was captured by two French privateers, who soon after put into port with their English prisoners. The unfortunate sailors were driven like a herd of cattle into an ancient church, where, on a scanty truss of straw, they lay down for the night; but some revengeful hand fired the litter, when the old sanctuary was speedily wrapped in flames. David lived to tell the scene which followed, when, as William Tennant sings,

"Pinnacle cam' doon and tow'r,
And Virgin Maries in a shower
Fell flat and smashed their faces."

From this burning pile the prisoners were marched by their vindictive guards to an inland citadel, where they experienced all the horrors of French captivity, till one day the thunder of the British cannon in Wellington's glorious march to Paris opened the doors of their dungeon to the weary captives. At the peace he returned home to his mother, who had taken up house in Pittenweem, where the true-hearted Scottish widow, like many a brave sister in adversity, earned an honest crust by spinning yarn for herring nets. Every Scottish whaler knew the story of David Wilson's dauntless stand at the helm of the "Advice;" but he was gratified to hear that his Dundee friends had sent his jacket, having in one pocket a bullet extracted from the wheel, and in another a yet weightier gift to his poor parents in Fife; but for a time his unceremonious leave-taking of the King's service made the East Neuk little else than a hiding place. Eventually, however, his Cellardyke bride induced him to settle there, and to take to life as a fisherman. He was spared to see his children's children grow up to man and woman's estate, and "fell asleep," as softly as he had ever done on his mother's bosom, on the fourth of April 1875, aged eighty-three.

Let us now turn to the tale that is told to us of one of Cellardyke's own gallant sons, Robert Pratt, who, at the age of eleven, left the dingy "ben end," which served as the Parish School of Kilrenny, to begin life as a cabin boy in the Exoise yacht "Prince of Wales," the same that is carved on the tombstone of her old commander, David Henderson, in the gable of East Anstruther Church. This was in 1800, when smugglers were almost nightly on the coast, running their cargoes amongst the rocks skirting St Andrews; but however alert, and often on the track, the old brig was but a lame dog in the chase, and so at the end of four years he quitted the thankless

service for a berth on board of the Dundee whaler, "Mary Ann," from which, however, at the end of a single voyage, he was scared by the press gang, who at this time kept a cat-like watch on the Greenland ships. He took refuge, as it were, in the forecastle of the Leith and London trader, the "Hope," but before weathering Inchkeith the young smacksman was seized by a lieutenant and his crew of the old "Ardent," which was then lying as a guardship in Leith Roads. Robert, as one of the smartest lads of the ship, was called to duty as a petty officer; but impressment was to him, as to every brave spirit, the iron yoke of bondage, to which he could never be reconciled. Love, all-conquering love, was also in the struggle; in fact, he had just espoused a winsome damsel of St Andrews, and being thus ready to dare and do to the uttermost for his liberty he actually leaped from the fore chains of the guardship on to the rigging of the ferry smack, which had tacked at the instant under her lee. The friendly gale soon landed him at Kinghorn, when, in the full realisation of his peril, he hastened away to the muirs of Fife, where, like a criminal escaping for his life, he took the most unfrequented paths, till the early hours of Sabbath morning saw him once more safe across his father's threshold in Cellardyke. By the connivance of his St Andrews friends he obtained a berth in a coasting schooner bound to London; but the Thames had been scarcely reached when he was once more impressed for the royal service, the ship being the "Thetis." He had seen a younger brother dragged like a felon up the gangway three days after his own seizure in the "Ardent;" and now his captivity, as he felt it, was shared by his old school companion, Thomas Watson, but both being of the same sanguine and resolute character, an escape was at once resolved upon, and so within a fortnight the first dark night found them with

their clothes bag in their teeth stealing through the hawse-hole, where the cable gave them a ready access to the stream. The frigate was lying about half-a-league from Greenwich, and there in the darkness and the rushing tide-way the swim for life begins. One leads, and the other as bravely follows; but a death cry is on the wave, "Oh, Lord God, have mercy upon me," and with the words upon his lips poor Tom sinks into a watery grave. Weary and sad Robert gained the bank, where, as he wiped away the tear for his unfortunate companion, he was accosted by a party of chimney sweeps travelling to London. Pity is a jewel of heaven's own setting in the humblest bosom, and so these waifs of the city stopped to light a fire to dry the clothes and give a warm drink to the poor fugitive. He had little difficulty in finding a situation on board one of the Greenwich whalers, from which he next removed his sea chest to a grand old troopship, which became his floating home for the next five years. One unlucky day, however, he was induced to enter as the mate of a collier brig, which on his first voyage was run into and carried during the night by a French privateer, swarming with men, seen, indeed, the day before, but jested over as the most unsailor like ship of the convoy. The prisoners were landed in France, but only to be hurried within the hour on a three hundred miles march into the interior. It was the dead of winter, and badly lodged and worse fed the poor sailors were so exhausted that, unable to walk, they staggered along, struck and kicked at like over-driven cattle by their mounted guard. Their destination was an old fortress; their lodgings a dreary stone-paved chamber at the top of the wall, which they were at first disposed to welcome as "rest at any price" for the sake of their blistered and bleeding feet; but cold and hunger soon made their situation insupportable.

“Better die like men breaking free than starve to death like rats in a hole,” exclaimed one of the eighteen captives, and the thought kindling every heart with a blaze of enthusiasm, a scheme was resolved upon that very evening to secure their liberty. A marlin spike, which next to his knife is the sailor’s best treasure, had been secreted from their jailors, and by it the iron stanchions which barred the window or rather aperture, which admitted both the blast and the light, was one night loosened and the next removed, when their blankets tied together enabled them to reach the ground. The English sailors almost ruined the exploit by a characteristic cheer, but a raging snow storm befriended the fugitives, and hand in hand they rushed into the darkness. That snow storm was the severest ever known in the country, but night by night they saw in it the hand of Providence. They dug trenches in the drift, in which they lay at once concealed and warm ; but their great difficulty was a supply of food. France was at that hour in the last crisis of her military glory ; but greater than the decrees of Napoleon were the decrees of heaven, for the poor French villagers, instead of betraying, helped the poor-exiles on their homeward way. As if remembering their own husbands and children in a foreign prison, these women would often assist the sailors from their little stores—their bounty being at times moistened with their tears ; but occasionally they had an opportunity of bartering such articles as they had for necessaries of life—their mother-of-pearl buttons being especially valued in the exchange—and so after six weeks of constant suffering and peril they at last gained the coast, when, to their signal joy, they descried an English ship in the offing, and a fisher boat being at hand they were soon safe on board, and within the week were landed at Falmouth.

Robert Pratt returned to Cellardyke, and settled with his family. He took to the whale fishing, and made no fewer than 37 voyages, till he was eventually disabled by an accident. This old sailor is a striking instance of the value of a handicraft to one of his vacation. His sagacious father impressed with this necessity had taught all his sons the art of the sail-maker, which Robert carried on with singular success for many a year. None in particular knew better how to fashion a lug sail, and after being long a household name in the sea homes of Fife, his eventful life closed on the 24th of June 1870, in his eighty-second year.

These veterans were, of course, the heroes of the hour, but nevertheless the fishers of the coast could be more than listeners in the tale of daring and romance.

It is true that no flag of defiance had waved upon the shore. The French war, being thus unlike the former struggle, when, in the autumn of 1779, Paul Jones and his squadron, flying the stars and stripes, rounded to in the offing of Cellardyke, hailed first one boat and then another to send "a pilot on board." The signals, however, were prudently unheeded. "We didn't like the cut of his jib," they said, "but still less the hang-dog faces on the weather gangway;" and the fishermen thus escaped the lure which entrapped the Pittenweem pilot, Jack Paton; or, again, two years later, when the noted privateer, Captain Fall, fired a random shot or two at Anstruther Custom House, which can be traced to this day on the rafters of the grim old tenement at the harbour head. But if Napoleon and his flotilla never came, the inhabitants, like their neighbours, were at least resolved and ready to resist him. At Anstruther and also at Crail there was a volunteer company a hundred strong, and, not behind the landmen, the fishers of Cellardyke had, in the patriotic ardour of the hour, enrolled

into a kind of naval reserve, which had been organised for the defence of the coast. They were carefully instructed by Captain Malone in the use of the boarding pike and the big gun—sometimes in the “fish yard,” sometimes at the Billowness—the war spirit being so thoroughly roused in the hearts of young and old that every schoolboy was also a volunteer, marching out and in with the detachment, armed with a long stick, by way of boarding pike, cut that morning, perhaps, from the woods of Innergellie, in utter defiance of the old Laird and all his henchmen. It was not all muster and parade, however; an order came—an order which was at once and cheerfully obeyed—to embark with the squadron that was sent out to Copenhagen to seize the Danish fleet in 1807. The Cellardyke men won the heart of old Admiral Gambier by the expertness and fidelity which signalised their service and which led to their being appointed in many cases as petty officers on board of prize ships. They especially distinguished themselves in the sharp action with the gallant Danes, but still more in the terrific storm which was encountered on the voyage to England. In fact, under heaven, the safety of several line of battleships and others of the squadron was owing to the presence of mind, and no less conspicuous seamanship, of old Alexander Pratt, the father of our hero, Robert. The three decker was running under close reefed topsails, when Alexander, who was on duty on the foretop, saw in a momentary rift in the darkness the white breakers close on the lee. “Wear the ship; she’s ashore on the Goodwin,” he shouted. The steersman hesitates, but an intrepid hand is on the stay, and, springing like a squirrel along the deck, Cellardyke seizes the wheel. “Take care, my lad,” said the officer of the watch, drawing a pistol from his breast, but the manœuvre saved the ship and the lives of all on board—nay, the signals

now made sent the whole fleet on another tack, and the fatal sandbank was weathered by one and all. Several of the fishers were likewise on board the "Eighty-Four," under the command of the Anstruther hero—Lieutenant, afterwards Sir James, Black—which was caught by the tempest while at anchor in Yarmouth Roads. The best bower was out, but the battleship was fast driving on the sands, and hope with the last gleam of day had forsaken the weary crew. "God help us; we shall never see the morning light again," said the next in command in a husky voice, and the fate of eight hundred men—captors and captives—seemed to be sealed, when James Black snatched an axe, and calling for volunteers, in which he was as bravely answered by his old companions at the "Big Dub," cut away the masts, when, like a forest king stripped off his branches, the ship with her living freight outbraved the storm.

