

The First of the English

A NOVEL

BY
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**THE
FIRST OF THE ENGLISH.**

BOOK I.
A STRANGE TRIP TO ANTWERP.

CHAPTER I. THE FLOOD IN THE SCHELDE.

“First officer, where’s the boatswain?”

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

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

“Aye, aye, sir!”

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

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

A moment after the boatswain makes his appearance, a weather-beaten old tar of England; one of the new class of deep-water sailors that are being made by Drake and Frobisher in voyages to the Spanish Main and far Pacific. Plucking a grisly

lock, this worthy, who would be all sea dog did he not wear a battered, steel breast-plate, salutes his captain, who says:

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

“About four bells, your honor.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Besides, in such a gale,” adds the captain, “the *Dover Lass* would make a fool of the bravest and biggest Spanish galleon that ever wallowed through the ocean;” and he looks with the pride and love of a sailor at the trim little ship, upon whose quarter-deck he stands, as she dashes through the waves of the

Schelde estuary, tossing the water that comes over her bow gracefully into her lee scuppers, with the South Beveland on her lee and Flanders on her weather quarter.

But the night is so inky and the spray so blinding, Guy Chester's sharp eyes can only discern half of his trim little vessel of about a hundred and thirty-five feet long, and two hundred and fifty tons burden, rigged in a fashion peculiar to the times of Queen Elizabeth of England, with three masts, the main and the fore square-rigged, and the mizzen felucca-like, with a long lateen yard, from which would be expanded a fore and aft spanker, were not the vessel under storm canvas.

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

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

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

Altogether the *Dover Lass* has the appearance of a man-of-war, though not its absolute discipline; and is evidently one of those vessels fitted out by private individuals to trade if they could, fight if they must, and plunder the "Dons" everywhere and all the time; similar to the ships that, under Drake and Frobisher and old John Hawkins, were a greater terror to the Spaniards than any of the Queen's vessels themselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And it is an awful night; one of those nights that impresses itself upon the memory of suffering mankind by the widows it makes and the orphans it leaves; a night in which the sea drowns the land; a night in which the dykes go down before the dash of the ocean, which, tearing huge sluices in them, rushes through to make the unprotected meadows and growing orchards the beds of roaring torrents and deep salt seas that drown awakened farmers and affrighted peasants with their flying wives and children, in Flanders, Brabant, Zeeland, Friesland, and the islands and polders of both the Hollands; a night that brought up another wail from the Netherlanders, rich and poor, noble and *bourgeoisie*, who had been undergoing the tortures and burnings and flayings of Philip II. and Alva, his viceroy, for five long years; a night when the long-continued northwest gale blowing in from the German Ocean upon the unprotected dykes of Holland, supported by a tide of wondrous strength and height, sweeps in upon the defenseless Netherlands to remind them of that great flood

shuddered at for centuries—that of the first of November, All Saints' night, of 1570—though this one is nearly two years afterwards, in the early spring of 1572. Evidences of the misery of the land soon come out of the darkness of the night. Lights move about hurriedly on the South Beveland shore, and the cries of a hundred drowning peasants come shrieking on the gale.

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

A minute later he commands hurriedly: “Call two quartermasters and heave the log.”

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

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

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

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

"Lights!"

"Ah! the lights of Sandvliet."

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

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

With this the nature of the man comes suddenly out; his wonderful rapidity of thought and action. He cries: "Order all hands to stand by to wear ship. Send twenty men aft to handle the lateen sail! See the two anchors stoppered at thirty fathoms! Tell the starboard division to arm themselves with pikes, cutlasses and axes—only steel. I want no noise about this business! Order three men to stand on the weather bow with grappling hooks."

A minute later he sees the flashes of firearms a cable's length ahead broad upon his larboard bow.

"Helm a starboard!" he cries to the men at the tiller. "That's enough; steer small, I tell you. Set the spanker!"

A minute after they are just passing the boats, and nicely calculating for the drift, which is tremendous, he suddenly wears his ship, giving his orders by speaking trumpet. "Hard a

starboard—slack away the lee braces. Haul taut the weather fore and main braces!” And as soon as the vessel comes round bracing his fore yards very sharply and jibbing his lateen sail, which, though nearly blown from its bolt ropes, drives the vessel hurriedly into the slack water formed by the current of the East Schelde meeting that rushing in by the main estuary.

The next minute he has ranged up alongside two boats, and his starboard division, taking tow lines in their hands, have sprung into the boats, boarding them and capturing them.

These are soon swinging alongside of his lee quarter, protected from the sea and the wind, while he is dropping anchor in the slack water formed by the South Beveland flats and marshes.

There has apparently been no contest in the boats, as his men have taken their occupants too much by surprise.

A minute later the boatswain clammers back on board the *Dover Lass* and reports: “We’ve got ’em both!”

“What are they?”

“One’s an enemy and one’s a friend.”

“Who’s the friend?”

“Dirk Duyvel and his band of Sea Beggars; and Dirk’s thunderin’ mad and swears he is being badly treated.”

“Who’s the enemy?”

“A Spanish pleasure galley or State barge, judgin’ by the fol-de-rols and awnings.”

“Who are on board her?”

“Rowers, who are begging for their lives, and two or three women, all of ’em fainted but one. There was an Italian, Spaniard or something, but Duyvel and his band when they captured the boat tied a rope round him, threw him overboard and towed him, and I guess he’s drowned by this time.”

“Very well, pull the Italian up and bring him on board. Also send Dirk to me.”

A minute later a stalwart-looking Dutch sea-dog comes over the side, stamping his heavy boots and uttering a curse with every stamp.

“Come here, Dirk, what are you growling about?” laughs the young captain.

“What am I growling about? *Donder en Bliksem!* I’m growling about YOU! What have you come between me and my prize for? Who are you, anyway?”

“You don’t recognize me, Dirk? Come this way.”

The captain throws open the door of his cabin and motions the Dutch seaman in. There is a flickering candle or two and a swinging lamp hanging from the skylight transom that give a subdued and melancholy glow to the scene, though the darkness of the night has been so intense that both the Dutchman and Englishman blink their eyes as they enter.

A second later Dirk cries: “*Bij den hemel!* I didn’t recognize the voice. It’s Captain Chester, *the First of the English!*”

This nickname that he gives to Guy is one the Hollanders had bestowed on him upon his first making his appearance among them as secret scout, envoy and general agent of Queen Elizabeth; though England, being nominally at peace with Spain, his sovereign has publicly disavowed the acts of this man who has been risking his life for her interests day by day, and night by night, off the coasts of the Hollands, watching the unequal fight the Netherlanders are making against the power of Philip of Spain, and the frightful cruelties, ravages, burnings, flayings, killings and torturings of Alva, his viceroy. This soubriquet, *De Eersteling der Engelschen*, the First of the English, has apparently been given in the faint hope of his not being the *last* of the English; that others will come over after him and help them fight for freedom of thought, and that they will be, if not openly protected, at least secretly supported, by the power of the daughter of Henry VIII., whom Philip has sworn to crush, as well as them, in the interests of his religion. For, utterly defeated at Jemmingen, and out-generaled and dispersed at Friesland, their Staatholder and Prince now in exile in Germany, the adherents of William the Silent have no hope, save in the active intervention, or at least covert assistance, of England.

On recognizing the Saxon the face of Dirk Duyvel assumes a sleepy smile, though he mutters savagely: "Captain Chester, your act is not the act of a Beggar of the Sea."

"Odds, herrings and turbot! You know I am one of you just the same," laughs the young man, exhibiting a medal which is strung about his neck, from which hang two or three Beggars'

cups in metal, and on which is inscribed: “*En tout fidelles au Roy!*” and an armed bust of Philip II. of Spain.

“It’s a curious emblem for an English subject to wear,” continues Guy, “but since I joined and became one of you, for the purposes of the one who—who sent me here,” he hesitates a little over his words, “I have acted to you as a brother *Gueux*, and abided by the principles of the Beggars of the Sea—if they have any. Have they, Dirk?” he jeers. “Answer me, you sea robber. Didn’t you steal your own brother’s vessel last year?”

“Well, there’s two sides to that story, captain,” guffaws the Dutchman. Then he goes on anxiously: “But you’re not going to steal my prize?”

“No, only to help you take care of it. And you need my aid to-night; for in this wind, without me, you would never get back to your vessels. Where are they?”

“About four miles down the East Schelde, round the point.”

“Then your boat would never make them. You would be blown into Sandvliet or past the forts and into Alva’s grip, unless you landed on a dyke and took the chance of being shot off-hand by his Spanish mercenaries. You couldn’t anchor your boats here, they’d be swamped; without the lee of my vessel you would be in the arms of the mermaids in ten minutes, or in Alva’s hands in two hours. Which would be worst?”

“I think Alva would be worstest for me and for *you!* He hates the ‘First of the English’ more as even he does us rebels,” grins the Dutchman. He shivers though, at that name, dreaded by every Netherlander, and more than all by those he had made

outlaws, and forced for very livelihood to become, under the name of *Gueux* (Beggars of the Sea), half way pirates and robbers, though still apostles of freedom under William of Orange.

“Now, what have you captured? Tell me all about it,” breaks in the Englishman, who has bright, flashing steel blue eyes and dancing, gallant, wavy chestnut hair, in strong contrast to the Hollander, who has a quiet, sleepy, soft countenance, embellished with a contented grin—one Dirk Duyvel never changed, whether saying his prayers, looting a ship, or cutting a Spaniard’s throat.

“Well, we drifted down here,” he answers. “The gale wasn’t as high then, or we wouldn’t have come. We saw a dyke burst down this side of Sandvliet and went over to take charge of the farmers’ goods, so if they came to life again we might return em. While doing this we saw a barge put off from a pleasure house that was being washed out, and it looked as if there might be plunder aboard. Well, we followed it. It was trying to get into the river to go to Antwerp, but we shot the sailors, and had just captured the boat and thrown an Italian overboard and were looking for plunder, and finding none, except the women, three of whom fainted when I talked to ’em and told what we were going to do with ’em, when you came alongside; and before I knew it I was down with two of your swash-bucklers on top of me with daggers at my throat, making remarks about my life.”

This dissertation is here interrupted by the entry of the boatswain, who touches his cap and deposits an inanimate and

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