

CHAPTER II.

THE SCHOONER *HALBRANE*

The Halbrane was a schooner of three hundred tons, and a fast sailer. On board there was a captain, a mate, or lieutenant, a boatswain, a cook, and eight sailors; in all twelve men, a sufficient number to work the ship. Solidly built, copper-bottomed, very manageable, well suited for navigation between the fortieth and sixtieth parallels of south latitude, the Halbrane was a credit to the ship-yards of Birkenhead.

All this I learned from Atkins, who adorned his narrative with praise and admiration of its theme. Captain Len Guy, of Liverpool, was three-fifths owner of the vessel, which he had commanded for nearly six years. He traded in the southern seas of Africa and America, going from one group of islands to another and from continent to continent. His ship's company was but a dozen men, it is true, but she was used for the purposes of trade only; he would have required a more numerous crew, and all the implements, for taking seals and other amphibia. The Halbrane was not defenceless, however; on the contrary, she was heavily armed, and this was well, for those southern seas were not too safe; they were frequented at that period by pirates, and on approaching the isles the Halbrane was put into a condition to resist attack. Besides, the men always slept with one eye open.

One morning--it was the 27th of August--I was roused out of my bed by the rough voice of the innkeeper and the tremendous thumps he gave my door. "Mr. Jeorling, are you awake?"

"Of course I am, Atkins. How should I be otherwise, with all that noise going on? What's up?"

"A ship six miles out in the offing, to the nor'east, steering for Christmas!"

"Will it be the Halbrane?"

"We shall know that in a short time, Mr. Jeorling. At any rate it is the first boat of the year, and we must give it a welcome."

I dressed hurriedly and joined Atkins on the quay, where I found him in the midst of a group engaged in eager discussion. Atkins was indisputably the most considerable and considered man in the archipelago--consequently he secured the best listeners. The matter in dispute was whether the schooner in sight was or was not the Halbrane. The majority maintained that she was not, but Atkins was positive she was, although on this occasion he had only two backers.

The dispute was carried on with warmth, the host of the Green Cormorant defending his view, and the dissentients maintaining that the fast-approaching schooner was either English or American, until

she was near enough to hoist her flag and the Union Jack went fluttering up into the sky. Shortly after the Halbrane lay at anchor in the middle of Christmas Harbour.

The captain of the Halbrane, who received the demonstrative greeting of Atkins very coolly, it seemed to me, was about forty-five, red-faced, and solidly built, like his schooner; his head was large, his hair was already turning grey, his black eyes shone like coals of fire under his thick eyebrows, and his strong white teeth were set like rocks in his powerful jaws; his chin was lengthened by a coarse red beard, and his arms and legs were strong and firm. Such was Captain Len Guy, and he impressed me with the notion that he was rather impassive than hard, a shut-up sort of person, whose secrets it would not be easy to get at. I was told the very same day that my impression was correct, by a person who was better informed than Atkins, although the latter pretended to great intimacy with the captain. The truth was that nobody had penetrated that reserved nature.

I may as well say at once that the person to whom I have alluded was the boatswain of the Halbrane, a man named Hurliguerly, who came from the Isle of Wight. This person was about forty-four, short, stout, strong, and bow-legged; his arms stuck out from his body, his head was set like a ball on a bull neck, his chest was broad enough to hold two pairs of lungs (and he seemed to want a double supply, for he was always puffing, blowing, and talking), he had droll roguish eyes, with a network of wrinkles under them. A noteworthy

detail was an ear-ring, one only, which hung from the lobe of his left ear. What a contrast to the captain of the schooner, and how did two such dissimilar beings contrive to get on together? They had contrived it, somehow, for they had been at sea in each other's company for fifteen years, first in the brig Power, which had been replaced by the schooner Halbrane, six years before the beginning of this story.

Atkins had told Hurliguerly on his arrival that I would take passage on the Halbrane, if Captain Len Guy consented to my doing so, and the boatswain presented himself on the following morning without any notice or introduction. He already knew my name, and he accosted me as follows:

“Mr. Jeorling, I salute you.”

“I salute you in my turn, my friend. What do you want?”

“To offer you my services.”

“On what account?”

“On account of your intention to embark on the Halbrane.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Hurliguerly, the boatswain of the Halbrane, and besides, I

am the faithful companion of Captain Len Guy, who will listen to me willingly, although he has the reputation of not listening to anybody.”

“Well, my friend, let us talk, if you are not required on board just now.”

“I have two hours before me, Mr. Jeorling. Besides, there’s very little to be done to-day. If you are free, as I am--”

He waved his hand towards the port.

“Cannot we talk very well here?” I observed.

“Talk, Mr. Jeorling, talk standing up, and our throats dry, when it is so easy to sit down in a corner of the Green Cormorant in front of two glasses of whisky.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Well, then, I’ll drink for both of us. Oh! don’t imagine you are dealing with a sot! No! never more than is good for me, but always as much!”

I followed the man to the tavern, and while Atkins was busy on the deck of the ship, discussing the prices of his purchases and sales, we took our places in the eating room of his inn. And first I said

to Hurliguerly: "It was on Atkins that I reckoned to introduce me to Captain Len Guy, for he knows him very intimately, if I am not mistaken."

"Pooh! Atkins is a good sort, and the captain has an esteem for him. But he can't do what I can. Let me act for you, Mr. Jeorling."

"Is it so difficult a matter to arrange, boatswain, and is there not a cabin on board the Halbrane? The smallest would do for me, and I will pay--"

"All right, Mr. Jeorling! There is a cabin, which has never been used, and since you don't mind putting your hand in your pocket if required--however--between ourselves--it will take somebody sharper than you think, and who isn't good old Atkins, to induce Captain Len Guy to take a passenger. Yes, indeed, it will take all the smartness of the good fellow who now drinks to your health, regretting that you don't return the compliment!"

What a wink it was that accompanied this sentiment! And then the man took a short black pipe out of the pocket of his jacket, and smoked like a steamer in full blast.

"Mr. Hurliguerly?" said I.

"Mr. Jeorling."

“Why does your captain object to taking me on his ship?”

“Because he does not intend to take anybody on board his ship. He never has taken a passenger.”

“But, for what reason, I ask you.”

“Oh! because he wants to go where he likes, to turn about if he pleases and go the other way without accounting for his motives to anybody. He never leaves these southern seas, Mr. Jeorling; we have been going these many years between Australia on the east and America on the west; from Hobart Town to the Kerguelens, to Tristan d’Acunha, to the Falklands, only taking time anywhere to sell our cargo, and sometimes dipping down into the Antarctic Sea. Under these circumstances, you understand, a passenger might be troublesome, and besides, who would care to embark on the Halbrane? she does not like to flout the breezes, and goes wherever the wind drives her.”

“The Halbrane positively leaves the Kerguelens in four days?”

“Certainly.”

“And this time she will sail westward for Tristan d’Acunha?”

“Probably.”

“Well, then, that probability will be enough for me, and since you offer me your services, get Captain Len Guy to accept me as a passenger.”

“It’s as good as done.”

“All right, Hurliguerly, and you shall have no reason to repent of it.”

“Eh! Mr. Jeorling,” replied this singular mariner, shaking his head as though he had just come out of the sea, “I have never repented of anything, and I know well that I shall not repent of doing you a service. Now, if you will allow me, I shall take leave of you, without waiting for Arkins to return, and get on board.”

With this, Hurliguerly swallowed his last glass of whisky at a gulp--I thought the glass would have gone down with the liquor--bestowed a patronizing smile on me, and departed.

An hour later, I met the innkeeper on the port, and told him what had occurred.

“Ah! that Hurliguerly!” said he, “always the old story. If you were to believe him, Captain Len Guy wouldn’t blow his nose without consulting him. He’s a queer fellow, Mr. Jeorling, not bad, not stupid, but a great hand at getting hold of dollars or

guineas! If you fall into his hands, mind your purse, button up your pocket, and don't let yourself be done."

"Thanks for your advice, Atkins. Tell me, you have been talking with Captain Len Guy; have you spoken about me?"

"Not yet, Mr. Jeorling. There's plenty of time. The Halbrane has only just arrived, and--"

"Yes, yes, I know. But you understand that I want to be certain as soon as possible."

"There's nothing to fear. The matter will be all right. Besides, you would not be at a loss in any case. When the fishing season comes, there will be more ships in Christmas Harbour than there are houses around the Green Cormorant. Rely on me. I undertake your getting a passage."

Now, these were fair words, but, just as in the case of Hurliguerly, there was nothing in them. So, notwithstanding the fine promises of the two, I resolved to address myself personally to Len Guy, hard to get at though he might be, so soon as I should meet him alone.

The next day, in the afternoon, I saw him on the quay, and approached him. It was plain that he would have preferred to avoid me. It was impossible that Captain Len Guy, who knew every dweller in the place, should not have known that I was a stranger, even

supposing that neither of my would-be patrons had mentioned me to him.

His attitude could only signify one of two things--either my proposal had been communicated to him, and he did not intend to accede to it; or neither Hurliguerly nor Arkins had spoken to him since the previous day. In the latter case, if he held aloof from me, it was because of his morose nature; it was because he did not choose to enter into conversation with a stranger.

At the moment when I was about to accost him, the Halbrane's lieutenant rejoined his captain, and the latter availed himself of the opportunity to avoid me. He made a sign to the officer to follow him, and the two walked away at a rapid pace.

"This is serious," said I to myself. "It looks as though I shall find it difficult to gain my point. But, after all it only means delay. To-morrow morning I will go on board the Halbrane. Whether he likes it or whether he doesn't, this Len Guy will have to hear what I've got to say, and to give me an answer, yes or no!"

Besides, the captain of the Halbrane might come at dinner-time to the Green Cormorant, where the ship's people usually took their meals when ashore. So I waited, and did not go to dinner until late. I was disappointed, however, for neither the captain nor anyone belonging to the ship patronized the Green Cormorant that day. I had

to dine alone, exactly as I had been doing every day for two months.

After dinner, about half-past seven, when it was dark, I went out to walk on the port, keeping on the side of the houses. The quay was quite deserted; not a man of the Halbrane crew was ashore. The ship's boats were alongside, rocking gently on the rising tide. I remained there until nine, walking up and down the edge in full view of the Halbrane. Gradually the mass of the ship became indistinct, there was no movement and no light. I returned to the inn, where I found Atkins smoking his pipe near the door.

"Atkins," said I, "it seems that Captain Len Guy does not care to come to your inn very often?"

"He sometimes comes on Sunday, and this is Saturday, Mr. Jeorling."

"You have not spoken to him?"

"Yes, I have."

Atkins was visibly embarrassed.

"You have informed him that a person of your acquaintance wished to take passage on the Halbrane?"

"Yes."

“What was his answer?”

“Not what either you or I would have wished, Mr. Jeorling.”

“He refuses?”

“Well, yes, I suppose it was refusing; what he said was: ‘My ship is not intended to carry passengers. I never have taken any, and I never intend to do so.’”