

THE CORSAIRS OF SAINT-MALO

OF them ' that go down to the sea in ships ' Saint-Malo, assuredly, has never had any lack. For the last five hundred years she has been the home of a sea-faring people; adventurers, discoverers, privateers—sometimes little better than pirates—she numbers them in plenty among her citizens, as we have good and convincing cause to remember. For it must be frankly confessed that not only did they dispute with us the freedom of the seas, but at one time it was not we who always had the best of the argument. In fact, to be honest, we suffered very considerably at the hands of these free-lances; and it is a surprising thing to remember that these men raised the little rock-city of their birth to be a power in France, and a danger to England. When the size of Saint-Malo is taken into consideration, this is a rather remarkable achievement.

Only a few of their names are familiar to us, though many more are preserved in the annals of the little town on the Brittany coast; and perhaps it is worth while to recall something of what is known of them. Commanding their own ships while they were yet boys (Duguay-Trouin was only sixteen); growing incredibly rich and piling up adventures as other lads steal apples; something more than a guild—almost a family, closely interlinked by marriage and descent; merchants sending out their own ships to trade as well as to fight, fighters manning their own ships to defend their trade—to read the story of their exploits is like turning over the pages of a fairy tale.

There was Jacques Cartier, one of the greatest of the sons of Saint-Malo, the discoverer of Canada; Porcon de la Barbinais, taken by the Algerine pirates

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and ultimately sent back to France to seek his ransom and to propose an alliance with the French King, and who when both were refused returned to Algiers and a horrible death, knowing that six hundred Christian prisoners stood hostage for him; Robert Surcouf, the 'Terror of the Indian Seas,' who took by surprise (it is not much to our credit) the East India Company's ship *Triton* compared to which his own was a cockle-shell; Mahé de la Bourdonnais, who founded in the West Indies cotton and indigo works, sugar plantations and refineries, grew rice and corn and introduced the manioc, planned and built houses, hospitals, canals, bridges, aqueducts and docks: later, he took Madras from the English but on terms disapproved by France, was thrown into the Bastille for four years, and set free only to die. And there were many others—Groult, La Rondinière, Magon, Danican Porée, Chapdelaine, Belleisle, Lefer, Lelarge, and Jacques Walsh, son of an Irishman settled at Saint-Malo, who is said to have held a commission from James II—fellow-traders, fellow-builders, fellow-fighters, cousins and kinsfolk, and all alike sons of their old rock-city.

Above all there was Duguay-Trouin himself. Nephew of La Barbinais and born of an old family of ship-builders and merchants, his father decided that René as a third son could best serve the family interest in the Church. So at the age of twelve he was sent to the seminary at Rennes where, as the first step towards the priesthood, he was tonsured. It is recorded that he was the most turbulent of all his comrades; yet but for his father's death when the lad was about fourteen it is certain that he would have been thrust into an ecclesiastical career. His later life suggests that it would have been the Church Militant indeed. However, he persuaded his mother to withdraw him from the seminary and to send him to

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Caen to study law. Here he started on a course of brawling, love-making, and drinking, filling up his leisure with duels, and with recovering from consequent wounds. It is not surprising that his family presently decided 'he was learning little at Caen'—and packed him off to sea in one of their smaller boats. This turned out to be what he was fitted for, and by the time he was sixteen he was in command of his own ship and had become a full-fledged privateer.

It is not possible to follow his career in detail. Once he landed in Clare and pillaged the country round; another time lying off Lundy Island, he slipped out on one side as a fifty-gun English man-o'-war came in after him on the other. Running before our *Prince of Orange* he 'had the impudence to fly an English ensign tied with a "weft" in it, which signifies *come aboard*'; taken prisoner, he won the heart of a shop-girl at Plymouth and with her help fooled his guard and got away in a small boat with four of his companions. The French King gave him a Sword of Honour, a pension of one thousand *livres* (which he handed over to his wounded lieutenant), and a compliment that history has handed down to us. For when Duguay-Trouin was describing one of his successes, and said, 'I ordered *La Gloire*'—his accompanying ship—'to follow me,' the King broke in with 'And Glory obeyed!' And this is but one side of his life, and that a youthful one; for later he entered the French Navy and rose to be Admiral. Little is known of his private life, but in Saint-Malo there still stands to-day the house where he was born, occasionally lived, and in the end died; and it still bears over its doors the arms granted him by the King—an anchor and two fleurs-de-lys.

It is a house full of memories—those great rooms on the first floor once displayed a wealth almost excessive, with rich tapestries and the costliest oriental

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carpets and cabinets; round the table met such a company as is not easy to conceive. These sea-kings, between one course and another, counted their millions to see whether they could spare more than thirty to lend to the King; and as they sipped their wine promised their host to fit him out a whole fleet if he would lead them to the conquest of Rio de Janeiro. And they themselves were worth looking at, for they were not quite like other men. Their coats of splendid brocade; their cravats of fine lace, their embroidered sashes and jewelled poignards, were magnificence itself; but the smell of tar and smoke hung about their silks and the weather-worn hands that held the crystal goblets were horny and scarred. They were no fine-weather sailors, nor were their true homes on land; they belonged to the sea and their ships, they bore the stamp of their stormy and adventurous life. And their women were such as their women should be—strong, handsome, superbly dressed, hot-tempered, stormy—it is an adjective which seems to belong to them all; and did not Mademoiselle Lelarge make herself famous by the box on the ear which put a prince into his proper place?

When the dinner was over the lackeys brought in, on great silver dishes captured from English vessels, piles of silver pieces heated over the fire—the famous *Fricassée de Piastres*. Then, from these same stately windows above us, the pieces were tossed out into the street below and gathered up by the children and beggars waiting there; while the magnificent corsairs and their handsome wives and daughters roared with laughter to see them jump and grimace and twist themselves about as the red-hot silver burned their clutching fingers. A fitting close!

I have seen the house within as it is to-day. The passage and lower stairs are very dark and no light is

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reflected from the panelling which has grown velvety with dust and age—it was necessary to feel one's way and the soft surface of the wood came off like soot on touching it. On the second landing even so much of convenience ended; after that there is no more than an open ladder rising in darkness to the next floor—no windows at all, no light of any sort, and the narrow steps thickly coated with the detritus of generations. The fine rooms are partitioned off and their beauty spoiled; the openings of the carved stone mantelpieces are bricked up into small hearths, and the splendour of the corsairs is vanished altogether. Yet here, and in these narrow streets, they were at home; and we, who fought them—and did not always conquer—may well spare a thought to their memory.

M. C. BALFOUR.

JESUS AD PETRUM PISCATOREM

I YIELD not to thy word :
' Depart from me, O Lord,
I am a man of sin.'
Say true thou once hast been ;
But at Love's cry : ' Depart '
I draw thee to my heart.

The glistening catch despise
As seeing with love's eyes
The God Whom men forget
A captive in thy net.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.