



By Conduct and Courage: A Story of the Days of Nelson: (G A Henty Masterpiece Collection)

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On the following day L'Agile dipped her ensign to the admiral and set off on her voyage. Will was well pleased with the smartness the crew displayed in getting under weigh, and more than satisfied with the pace at which she moved through the water. For a month they cruised off the coast of Cuba, during which time they picked up eight small prizes. These were for the most part rowing-galleys carrying one large lateen sail. None of them were sufficiently strong to show fight; they were not intended to attack merchantmen, but preyed upon native craft, and were manned by from ten to twenty desperadoes. Most of them, when overhauled, pretended to be peaceful fishermen or traders, but a search always brought to light concealed arms, and in some cases captured goods. The boats were burned, and their crews, mostly mulattoes, with a sprinkling of negroes—rascals whose countenances were sufficiently villainous to justify their being hanged without trial,—were put ashore; for the admiral had given instructions to Will not to burden himself with prisoners, who would have to be closely guarded, and would therefore weaken his crew, and, if brought to Port Royal, would take up prison accommodation. At last one day a schooner rather bigger than themselves was sighted. Her appearance was rakish, and there was little doubt as to her character. All sail was at once crowded on L'Agile. The schooner was nearly as fast as she was, and at the end of a six hours' chase she was still two miles ahead. Suddenly she headed for the shore and disappeared among the trees. L'Agile proceeded on her course until opposite the mouth of the inlet which the pirate had entered. It was getting dark, and Will decided to wait until morning, and then to send a boat in to reconnoitre. "I have not forgotten," he said to Harman, "the way in which those two French frigates I have told you of ran into a trap, and I don't mean to be caught so if I can help it." L'Agile remained hove to during the night, and in the morning lowered a boat, with four hands, commanded by Dimchurch, who was ordered to row in until he obtained a fair view of the enemy, and observe as far as possible what preparation had been made for defence. He was absent for half an hour, and then returned, saying that the schooner was lying anchored with her sails stowed at the far end of the inlet, which was about half a mile long and nearly as wide, with her broadside bearing on the entrance. "If it is as large as that," Will said, "there will be plenty of room for us to manœuvre. Did you make out what number of guns she carried?" "Yes, sir, she mounted four guns on each side; I should say they were for the most part ten-pounders." "I think we can reckon upon taking her. Our guns are of heavier metal than hers, and the long-tom will make up for our deficiency in numbers." L'Agile was put under as easy sail as would suffice to give her manœuvring powers, and then headed for the mouth of the inlet. She was half-way through when suddenly two hidden batteries, each mounting three guns, opened upon her. "Drop the anchor at once," Will shouted; "we will finish with these gentlemen before we go farther." The schooner at the same time opened fire, but at half a mile range her guns did not inflict much damage upon the cutter. Lying between the two batteries she engaged them both, her broadside guns firing with grape, while the long-tom sent a shot into each alternately. In a quarter of an hour their fire was silenced, three of the guns were dismounted, and the men who had been working them fled precipitately. "Take a boat and spike the remaining guns, Dimchurch," Will said; "I don't want any more bother with them." In a few minutes Dimchurch returned to the cutter, having accomplished his mission. The anchor was then got up again, and she proceeded to attack the schooner. L'Agile's casualties had been trifling; only one had been killed and three wounded, all of them slightly.

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