How We Ran the Frenchman on the Mag

Walter J. Shaw

Cover: The Shipwreck. Painting by Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky

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Foreword

The manuscript of this short story, written by the artist Walter J. Shaw over a century ago, was donated to Salcombe Maritime Museum by Salcombe residents, Yvonne and her late husband, Alan Paul. As far as can be established, it has not been published before.

The story is set in 1796 during the French Revolutionary Wars and has, as its principal characters, two young 'fisher-boys', John aged 15 who lived with his widowed father at Lannacombe Mill and Jim, 16, from Hallsands. Whilst out fishing in their little crabbing boat they are captured by French privateers seeking gold belonging to Jim's father. Thanks to their local knowledge, fine seamanship and quick wits, the two boys are able to turn the tables on their captors by sinking their vessel (a chasse-marée). The story is recounted seventy years later by John, for whom he events of that day 'stand out beyond all the other many perils and adventures of a stormy and troubled life'. The story ends with Jim saying 'Someday, perhaps, I shall tell you how this same gold cost Father his life, and drove me out to spend fifty years on the great ocean,' but it is not known if Shaw ever completed the sequel.

Walter James Shaw (1851-1933) lived and worked at Salcombe, Devon, for much of his life, specialising in coastal and marine subjects which he painted across much of the south-west. He became a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy and elsewhere and was renowned for his atmospheric coastal scenes featuring dramatic storms and breaking waves.

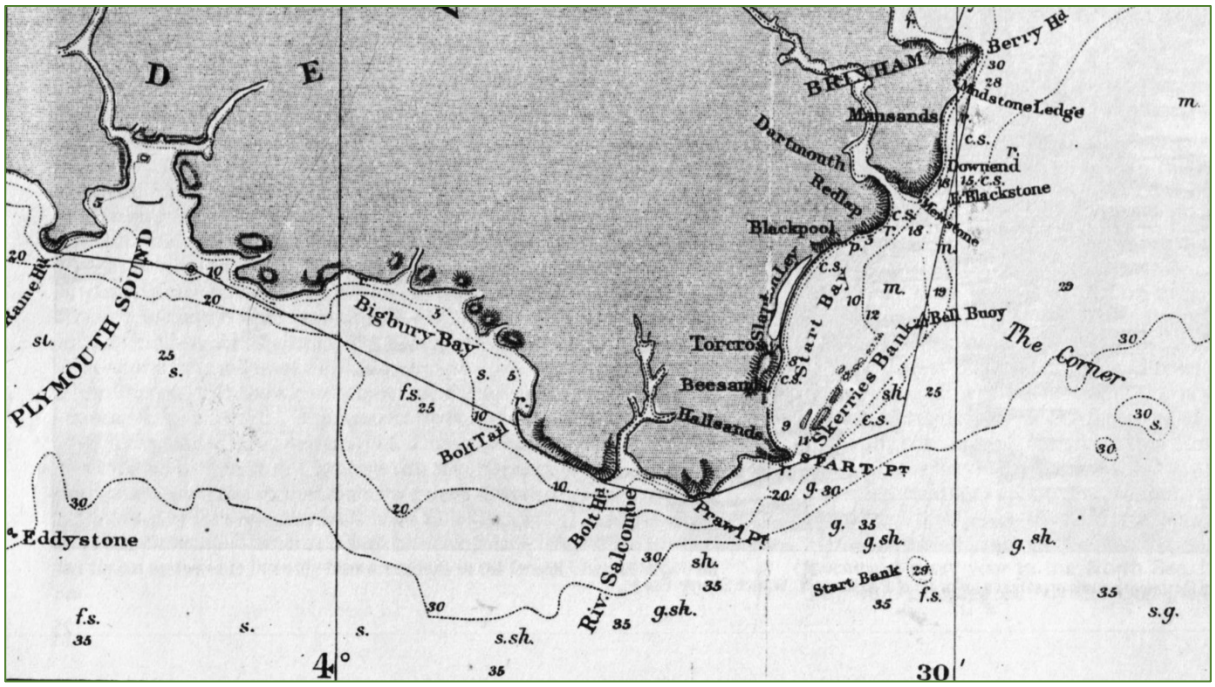
Shaw was born in Westbury–on-Severn, Gloucestershire, the son of a manager on the South West Railway and it was on the railways that he started his working life in 1865 at the age of 14, as an assistant clerk at Littlehampton Station. During the 1870s he lived in London and began making his way as an artist. His paintings were exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1881,1888 and 1892. By 1881, Shaw, his wife and two daughters, had moved down to Salcombe, living first at The Elms and later at Blackstone Lodge in Devon Road.

On his death in 1933, the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* reported that Salcombe had suffered 'the loss of one of its oldest and best-respected inhabitants on Christmas Day through the death of Mr. Walter Shaw, the well-known Westcountry marine artist, aged 84. Mr. Shaw will be remembered for his beautiful seascape paintings. … He was a well-known sea angler and was captain of the old Salcombe Company Volunteers.' Shaw's two daughters Mary and Eleanor were spinsters and so it is unlikely that there are any living descendants.

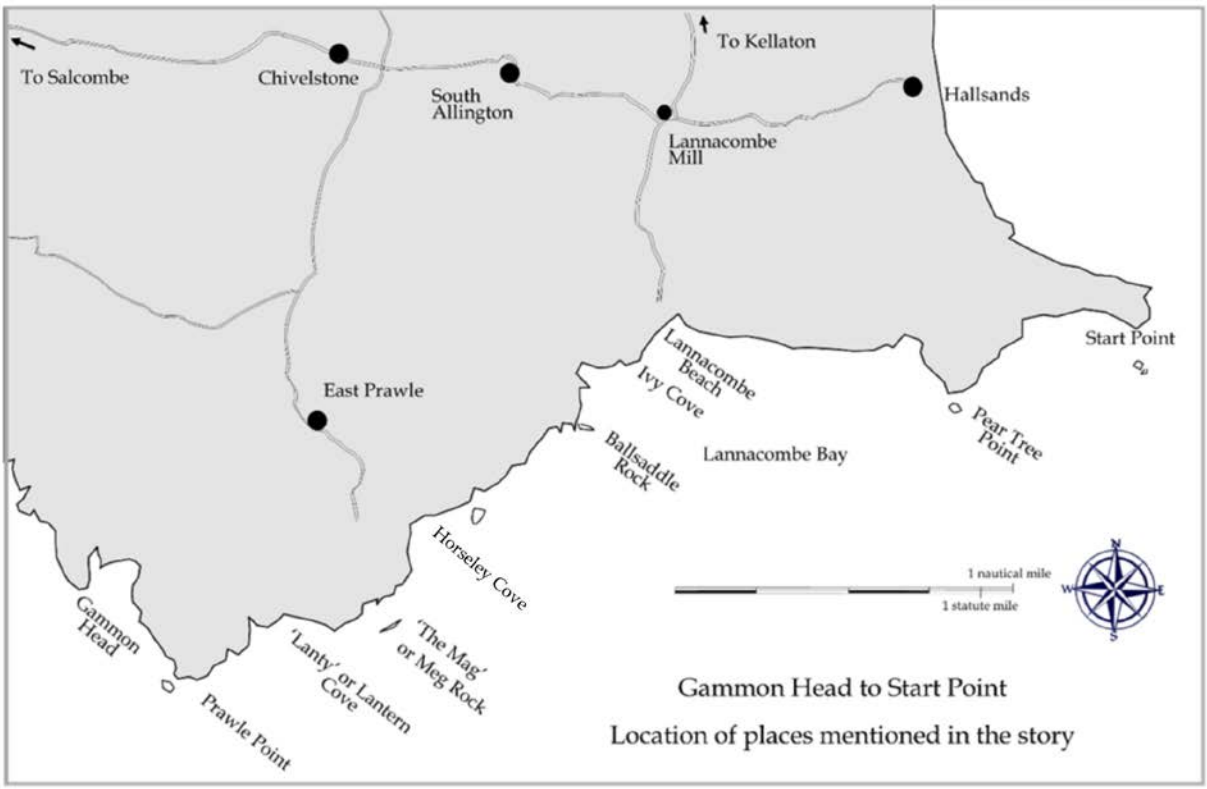
A selection of Shaw's local seascape paintings is reproduced in the Appendix.

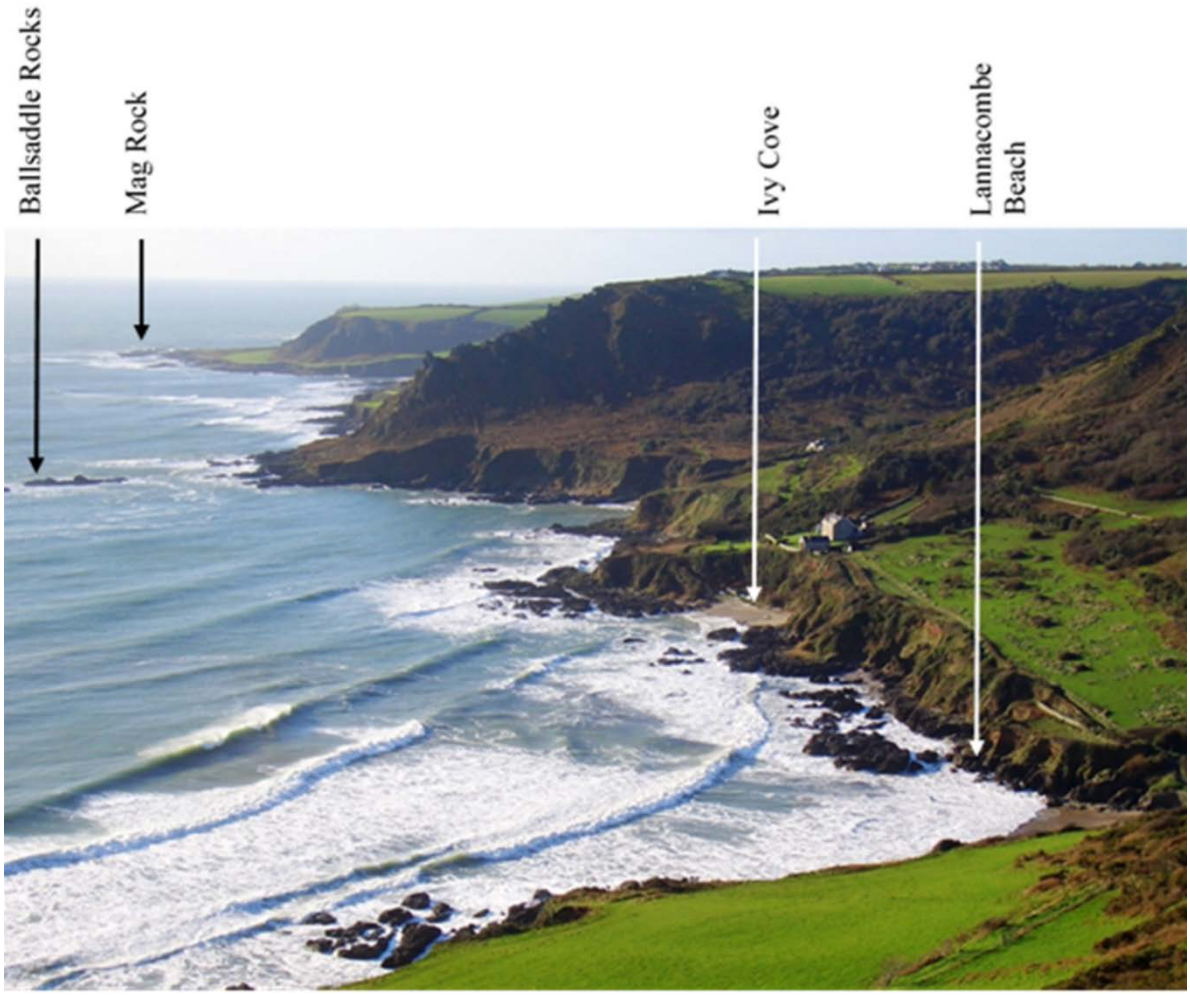
Roger Barrett
Curator, Salcombe Maritime Museum

Locations referred in the story



Victorian Chart of fishing grounds between Plymouth Sound and Torbay
[Devon Sea Fisheries Committee]





Above: Looking west from Lannacombe Bay. Photo: Roger Barrett

Below: Looking east from Prawle Point. Photo: Roger Barrett

Chapter I

Although it is seventy years ago, I can remember, as if only yesterday, that day in June 1796 when, by the courage of a little fisher-boy of Hallsands, a rascally French lugger ended its long career of robbery and plunder, and left its foul and rotten hull amongst the caves and crevices of the dear old "Mag" rock, where the crabs and lobsters crawled amongst her ribs, and the big pollock swam in and out of her dirty little cabin for many a day.

For fifty years has my life been spent on the great ocean, but this one great trial stands out beyond all the other many perils and adventures of a stormy and troubled life. Even now, sometimes in my dreams I take again that desperate dive into the tide-race with a Frenchman's bullet for my head when it showed above the surface, and the long and fierce struggle for life with the wild water.

The sun was just showing over the ragged top of the steep hill which shuts in our deep combe on the south-eastern side. This high land stretches away to where the old Pear Tree Head raises its storm swept sides above the blue Channel and looks down on the low, evil-looking point called The Start with its ridged back all spikey with rocks, for all the world like a great newt or lizard crawling up out of the sea. So steep was the hillside, and so deep our valley, that although the hill bordering it to the west was flooded with sunshine, the bottom of the combe was in deep shadow and the white mist was still rising from the banks of the stream, which following a winding course with narrow water-meadows on each side, passes out through the distant gap to the southward, from which direction came the soft, sweet, salt air and a gentle murmuring sound of the sea.

Just in front of me, as I sat on the old apple tree (which had fallen across the stream and was left as a bridge), was our old mill with its high over-shot wheel. Behind the house the combe divides into two branches, one passed north-westward towards Chivelstone. This is the broadest and in it is our orchard and gardens; the other running north-east towards Kellaton with the road to Torcross and Dartmouth.

Down each of these valleys runs a stream which, carried partly by artificial channels or leats along the hillsides, join above the mill-wheel and then run in a broad stream through our farmyard and away down Lannacombe to the sea.

My father and I lived at the mill-house. I had neither mother, brother nor sister. Our mill hand (a half-witted man, "mazed" as we used to say) and his wife lived with us, and this woman looked after the house, and did the cooking. I could read but badly, and write worse, but could sail, paddle or scull our boat as well as any man, although I was but fifteen. Also I knew all the crab holes and prawn pools from Start to Prawle Head and all the marks for the best fishing grounds for pollock, bream and conger along the twelve miles of iron coast as far as Bolt Tail and the great bay of Bigbury, where, even in our times, the people were reckoned only as savages and who used to murder and plunder all those whom escaped ashore from the many vessels lost every year on the rocks of Thurlestone and Hope. For no part of the coast is more dangerous for vessels coming in from abroad, and trying to make a landfall, than this, especially with the wind from the south and west. Missing Plymouth, they are set by wind and tide into the Bay, and, if unable to weather the wild point of Bolt Tail, round which the flood tide sweeps with great strength, ashore they must go.

My father was a silent, gloomy man, who took little notice of me, so that I did pretty much as I liked. He was considered a rich man in our parts, but his money, or the most of it I knew, he kept in a big, iron-bound box in his room. How this money had been obtained I did not trouble myself to guess in those days, but the possession of it brought trouble and danger to us as my story will show. Neither in after years did we prosper, so long as one penny of it remained. As I say, I did not trouble to guess how we came by so much more money than any if our neighbours; but I could remember many times when the sea fog swept up the combe, and

it was almost impossible to see plainly more than a few yards, that there would be a great gathering of fishermen from Hallsands and Prawle (and even Beesands) along the shore at Lannacombe, with men sent out to watch the roads from Salcombe and Dartmouth, and that after long, silent watching, the sails and hull of a big lugger would slowly draw out of the mist, and her sharp bows would be run quite ashore on the shingle of Ivy Cove (keeping a line astern to an anchor dropped some distance off, by which to haul her off again and keep her end on to the beach). Then there would be a great bustle and handing ashore of small casks slung together, just as much as a man could carry, and then in a short time every man was gone, each with his load, and the lugger hauled off stern first, would silently disappear into the fog.

Smugglers bringing the contraband ashore by an unknown artist. Photo: HMRC

Chapter II

Well, I was sitting, as I said before, on the old apple tree, surrounded by all the sweet and peaceful sounds of a summer's morning in our quiet valley. Not that I was conscious of them at the time, being in the worst possible temper, for had not Jim Pepperell of Hallsands (my only companion and friend) gone to Dartmouth the day before with a boatload of crabs, and had he not promised to bring back a bag of mussels for bait, and were we not to start at 5.30 this morning for the outer bream ground, a good ten miles off in the breezy Channel? And it was now six o' clock and no sign yet of Jim. I sat and kicked my heals in the stream nd threw stones at the ducks and the ridiculous row of geese which had just started off up the orchard for their daily forage in the marsh, each one exactly behind the other in a single row like soldiers in line, and all ducking their heads to the ground as they passed through the open gate, although there was nothing whatever to knock them against.

But there comes Jim at last down the steep hill beyond the farm-yard where the road winds away to Start Bay. I can see his long, lanky body, and his knock-knees, and best of all, the bag of mussels on his back. Jim I rather looked down upon, at least then, but before the day was over my opinion changed so much, that I looked up at him and down on myself. He was awfully poor, as poor as the mice in Chivelstone Church, so that I had an extra large lump of cold bacon and bread in the basket with the fishing gear, and a big bottle of cider which would make his sky-blue eyes sparkle. He was a great, awkward, over-grown, half-starved boy of sixteen, with yellow hair curled tight over his head. He went crabbing, pulling the boat whilst his father hauled the pots.

Just as I met Jim in the yard, our man came out of the mill. He was a little dark chap with beady eyes, very dirty and ragged with a straw hat without a brim, but he was a good old soul, though only half-witted.

"Master John" he said, "don't 'ee go out a' braaming to-day. It be a vexey marning, vog away to southard thick as thick it be, and don't 'ee hear the wood peckers a'larfing and crying wet, wet, wet ? Cawh my dear, don't 'ee go braaming now".

"Why" I said, "the wind aist, what there be of ut, that'll blow the fog right away to say. What, not go breaming, when Jim has all they mussels! You must be mazed, sure enough

"I tell ee, master John" he says, "it be vexey, wind be aist now, as you says, her wun't stand, her'll go round with the sun for sartin, and bring that vog in like as a warl, sure as sure. Hear how the say be a'crying Prawle way; us'll have the wind south-aist for sartin afore the cows come home."

As he spoke, there at came out from the south-westward, away from the lonely shores of Prawle Head, a long muttering grumble, swelling and rising and echoing up the combe. The old ocean was stirring and complaining in her sleep. "Get out " said Jim, "us bain't a-feared of a little vog and groundsay, whoever heard tell of vog without groundsay? If so be the wind comes out south and west, anyways us can fetch Zalcombe. Run in and get the compass, my dear man and come on Jack, us be late on the tide now".

So Jim started off down the combe with the bag of mussels on his back and I after him with the basket of gear. But somehow, either from mazy Bob's croakings, or from a presentiment of the coming troubles and the mournful wailing of the sea, the brightness of the day seemed already gone, and with it, half the pleasure of our long-talked-of breaming. Half a mile down the combe we went, past the old elm tree and the ruined cottage, where the stream runs down over the big stones on to the sands of Lannacombe Bay, then sharp round to the right along the tip of the low bracken-covered cliffs backed by the high hills pointed with many tors and ivy-covered rocks which stretch away for miles past Prawle and Gammon Head to Salcombe. To the south-east the old Pear Tree Point rose dark and gloomy, and far in the distance was Bob's fog bank sure enough, miles away to the south, and stretching the whole

length of the horizon from east to west. But the wind was east (keeping it away) and just enough of it to darken the blue water and show little spats of white foam in the tide. Every few moments a long dark line would show to seaward. This would break into two or three white patches and finally into a long, white bank of foam which would come rumbling and roaring over the flat rocks which stretch far out, showing purple under the shallow, clear water.

Miles and miles (perhaps a hundred) away in the great ocean the fierce south-west wind was blowing, and this great heave of the sea was coming home to warn us of the coming storm. Down below in Ivy Cove was our boat hauled up on the white shingle: a great heavy, sixteen-foot-lump of a craft, with her stone ballast thrown out on the beach close by.

After all our hurry, we had to wait for mazy Bob to help us to launch her, and it was some time before he come tumbling down the steep path loaded with a big old ship's compass which was carefully stowed away under the stern thwart. Once she was in the water it did not take long to ship the mast and set the great sprit sail and foresail. This is the rig of all our boats in Start Bay and west as far as Hope Cove. A nasty, dangerous rig it is too, but of this we thought nothing, for, with the gentle east wind the boat, heavy as she was, walked away from the land at a great pace. This, and the long, gentle heave of the sea under us, soon banished all recollections of Bob's warnings. In less than two hours, if the wind stood, we should be out on the fishing ground and hauling in the goggle-eyed red bream.

Prawle Point and the Arch Rock from the east. Photo: Roger Barrett

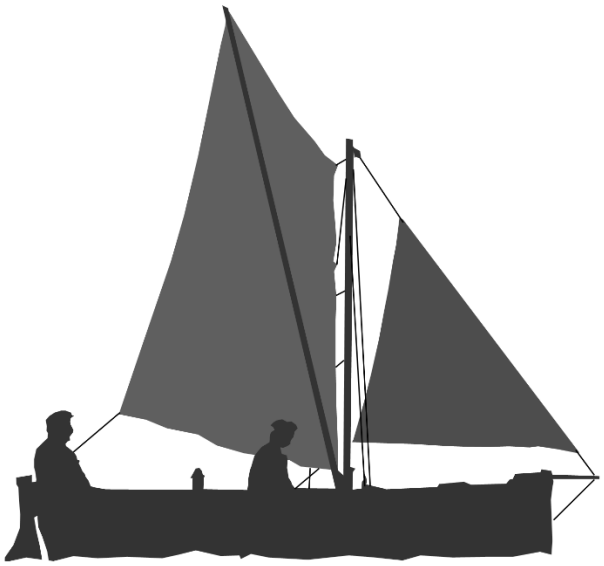
Soon to the east the spiky back of Start came into view, on the west Prawle Head with Archway rock and the grand mountain outline of Bolt Head beyond; then as we got further off, Rame Head twenty miles away faint and blue, the western entrance to Plymouth Sound. Gradually eastward, the high land beyond Dartmouth opens out round Start; next Blackpool Bay and the white cliffs of Strete. Then down goes the helm and, as the boat comes to wind with her greet mainsail shaking, I let fly the foresheet, haul down the foresail and unship the long, clumsy sprit. Over goes a stone with forty fathoms of line, for we are in 25 fathom water now and the land looks only a few inches high on the northern horizon; down comes the mast and the great mainsail is bundled up anyhow round it.

Now we are ready for the bream. The stone we have down is not heavy enough to anchor the boat, only check her as she drifts westward with the strong tide; so we shall drift over several miles of water, perhaps as far as Bolt Tail, catching bream all the way if they are feeding, and so they are, for suddenly Jim sings out:

"One, dew, dree, vowr, vive
Wance I kitched a fish alive "

and up comes a big two-pounder, twicking and tugging all the way up from the far off bottom of the sea. Then one to me, and so on for another hour, by which time we have fifty bream in the boat, with their silver sides and red backs all in a heap in the bottom. Never was such luck. Excited as we were, we hardly noticed that the wind had dropped away quite calm, but now it began to come in puffs from the southward, all damp and clammy from the great fog bank only a few miles off, then, with a sudden rush and a mournful wailing noise, it settled down to a gentle steady breeze bringing the fog down with it.

A few moments more, and the dark blue sea turned a pale grey. Dabs and puffs of fog came drifting over us, the sun turned to a whitish ball, and then went out altogether. Another puff and the fog, thick as a wall, was over us. I caught one glance of Prawle Head far on our port beam, and then all was blotted out.



A Hallsands Crabber [copied from a photograph in the National Maritime Museum Oliver Hill Collection]

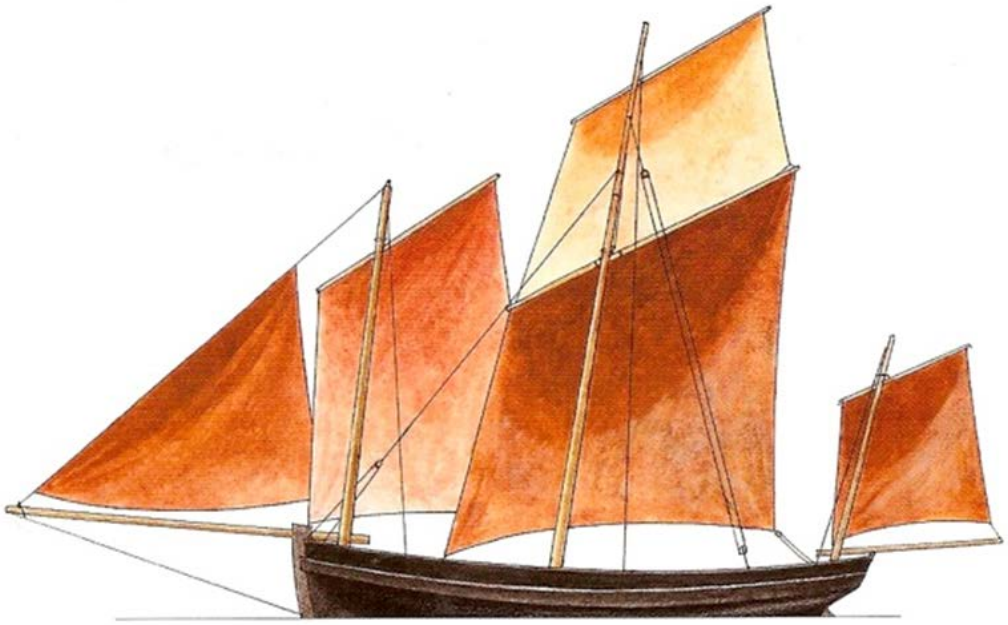
Chapter III

Well, after the fog came down on us, there was not much more pleasure in fishing. First of all, the wind went into the south-west and began to freshen in damp, chilly puffs, so that the boat, swinging to it, got broadside onto the tide with the anchor line trailing away on the port bow. Also the fog began to thicken into an unusually dense one, and at times we could hardly see the brightness of the sun through it. The sea began to get up, and altogether I wished we were under-weigh for home, still Jim said nothing, and I was not going to be the first to show funk.

Soon however, he began to look about in an uneasy manner, and fidget his long legs. This I could see out of the corner of my eyes, and presently, when a bigger roll than usual lifted us up and sent a splash of spray over the starboard gunnel, he began to haul up his line and sang out: " Here, us must get out of this. Haul in your line Jack, and let's get underweigh. Us have got a fine let of bream anyhow, and we'm well to the westward of Prawle now, pretty nigh down to Bolt Head, I reckon."

Nothing loth, I got in my line and jumped forward to haul up the anchor (whilst Jim shipped the rudder) but hardly a fathom was in before Jim called out in a quick, startled manner: "Hark! What be that? Away from windward came a splashing, roaring sound, like a shoa1 of mackerel makes at play. "Only macker" said I "and a large skule too". "No, it bain't macker" says Jim, "it be a ship coming down right a top of us. Harl up quick, or us'll be run down, sure enough".

As he spoke, I heard the creaking of the yards and cheaping of the ropes in the blocks. It was a vessel without doubt, and close aboard of us. Almost before I could begin to haul in the line, a big, dark body loomed through the fog a little on our port bow. Another moment, and a big lugger hove into view, a Frenchman she was too, with her three masts (we had none rigged so in our ˉEnglish service), her great sails all full with the fresh breeze, and a white, roaring mass of foam under her sharp stem.



A Chasse Marée [internet image, unknown source]

A lot of men were looking out over her bows and they saw us instantly, for we heard a confused shouting, and then she kept away a little (so as to clear us by twenty yards, or so). Then coming sharply up into the wind, she came down upon us on the lee side, her way just stopping as her long bowsprit was over the boat, an ugly little Frenchman on the end of it with a line in his hand. This rascal dropped right down into us, giving me a shove aft which sent me all amongst the bream in the bottom of the boat. His knife was out in a moment and our anchor line was cut and the end of the line fastened to the ring in the boat's stem, before I had got on my legs again.

As they kept away with the fore-sheet to windward to check the lugger's way, we dropped quietly alongside on their port side, all very smartly done. The vessel was what they call in their outlandish lingo, a chasse-marée, whatever that may mean; the foremast stepped right in the eyes of her, the big mainmast in the middle and the mizzen right aft with a bumkin out over the stern to haul out the mizzen sheet. She carried three lug sails, with a topsail set ever the main lug, also a jib and foresail. Her sides were worn and stained and sadly in want of a coat of paint, and her iron channels for setting up the rigging all red with rust. Over her low bulwarks leaned about fifty as dirty-looking rascals as one could wish to see, each with a broad grin on his face, but we made them laugh on the wrong side of their mouths, these Frenchers, before we finished with them. It was an evil hour for them when they hauled us aboard their dirty old hooker.

One of these fellows took me by the back of my jersey and hauled me up over the bulwarks, helped on the way by a kick from the man in the boat. Jim was bundled after me in the same way. Our boat was dropped astern towing with a long line and the lugger’s fore-sheet eased off.

Start Point. The lighthouse was completed in 1836. Photo: Roger Barrett

Chapter IV

Here was a pretty end to our fishing, but we were not given much time to think of that for as soon as we were on our feet again, there was a shove aft together with another kick and a shout of what sounded like "Et ee toot sweet". On the dirty little quarter-deck stood the Captain, and a queer looking skipper he looked, quite as broad as he was long, and his short fat legs so bandy that, as we used to say, “He could not have stopped a pig" (but if it had not been for these wide apart legs I doubt if Jim would have lived to see the sun set on this unlucky day, as you shall hear presently). His round, bullet head seemed to grow out of his body without any neck and where the neck should have been, was wound a great red shawl, or comforter (although it was midsummer). Over his closely cropped hair was a dirty, red nightcap. His face, what with dirt and sun and sea tan, was the colour of a brick; eyes like little black slits under the shaggy eyebrows, and a great hooked nose came down over a fierce moustache twisted into two long spikes on each side. He wore great sea-boots reaching above his knees, and a pair of once white canvas trousers, with a wide belt in which was stuck a long ship's pistol with a barrel a foot at least in length and an old blue jersey, which was new quite green with age, completed his picture.

This fierce-looking little Frencher stood about five feet two inches in his big boots, but he made up in breadth and ferociousness of appearance for his want of height and certainly looked a very ugly fellow to tackle, so I thought at least, and Jim, looking down on him from his nearly six feet of shambling body, seemed to think so too. Behind us stood a half-circle of grinning idiots chattering like monkeys. The skipper sat himself down on the little dog-kennel hatchway which led into the cabin of the lugger, and addressed us something like this:

"A ha mine young vrends, this is what you call very much tres bon, jolly well met, eh? You tach fish eh? Where from you do come? Salcombe? Dartmouth, eh? you see, I know dese place. Speak you long seacock son, vraiment, true, what you call no lie."

"Please sur" says Jim,"us comes from Lannacombe". At this there was a great shout and jabbering from the crew of "Lannacombe, a ha!" The captain screwed up his little slits of eyes, and his moustache seemed to lift up under his great nose.

"This is very much tres goot" said he, "yow vil take mine ship into Lannacombe, you shall be pelot for me, eh, you shall take me to ze cove. Perhaps you knock against one leetle rock, goot, this will be for your head", and he took out his long pistol and pointed it straight at Jim's nose. Well Jim, he looked right down the barrel of the pistol as cool as Christmas, and says, "Put he away, monsoor, us bain't a-feared of they things in these here parts. If so be you wants to go into Lannacombe, I can take ‘ee in without knacking no rock and without ‘ee a-poking that there pistol agin my knawse."

I was thinking all this time that the lugger was, after all, only one of our old smuggling friends and that if the Frenchers had known who I was, they would not have been so free with their kicks. But I was soon to have a very unpleasant surprise. The little skipper laughed at Jim and gave him a great slap on the back, saying: "Bon garsong, that is what you call good boy, trew-blew, eh? Take you ze helm and put us to Lannacombe, toot sweet."

So Jim took the tiller and the lugger was kept away on her course in for the land and as no one took much notice of me, I stowed myself away behind Jim, right in the stern where I had a view of the whole of the long, dirty deck. Most of the crew were forward, looking out sharp enough for the land, the skipper standing close to the main rigging, peering out into the fog and every now and then casting a look at the sails to see how they drew, or a glance at Jim's steering. He soon seemed quite satisfied with that as he might well be, for this boy had been knocking about in boats since he could just toddle and, if ever he made a mistake sailing his father's boat, he was pretty sure of a crack over the head with the blade of a paddle to make him remember it.

Lannacombe Beach with Ivy Cove on the far left. Photo: Roger Barrett

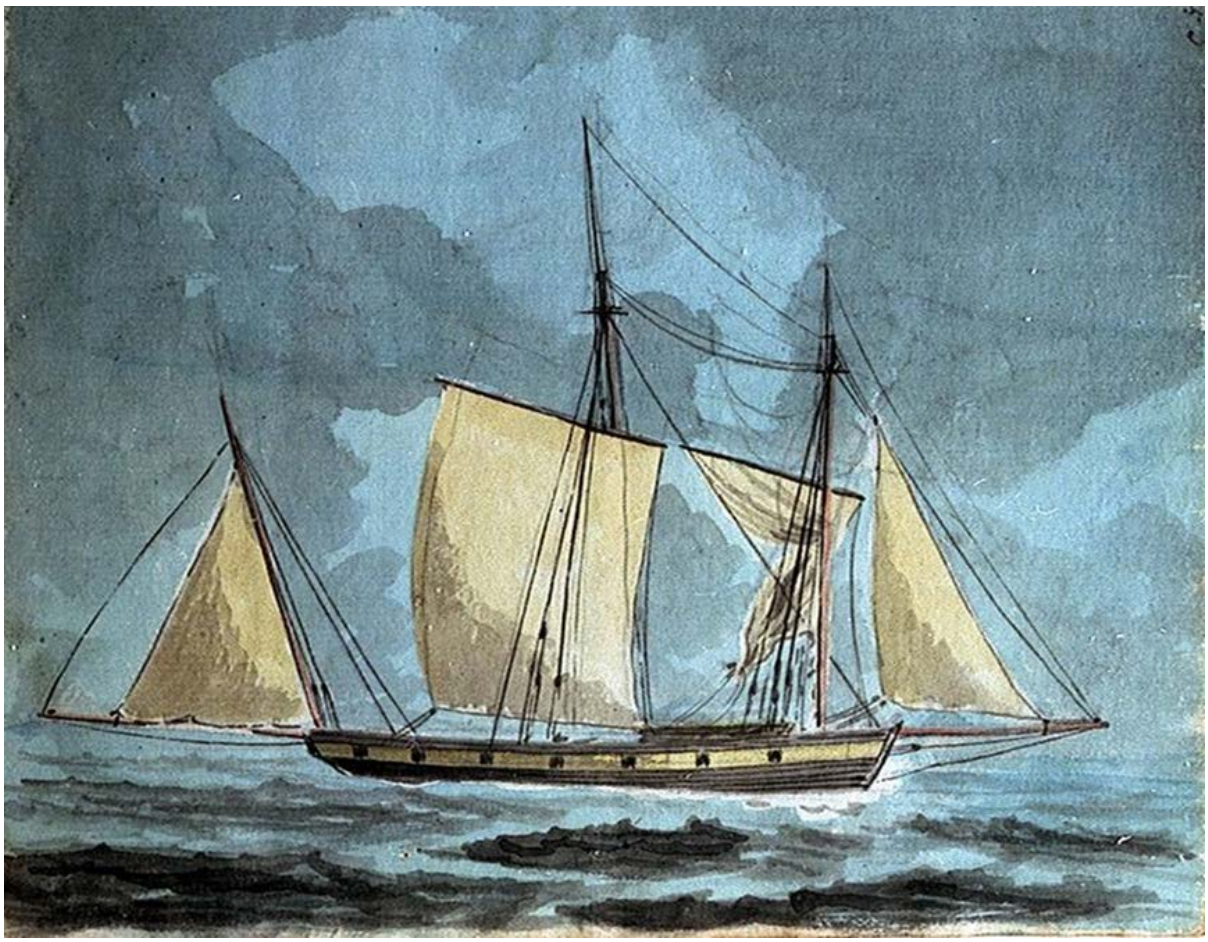
The wind was now freshening fast, and the fog, if anything, thicker than ever. With her great lug sails all drawing, the wind being a little on her port quarter, she was going through the water at a great pace and closing in quickly with the land. The fog and breeze were rapidly raising a heavy swell which came rolling along, lifting the stern high and passing forward with a great, roaring mass of foam on each side, up to the top of the low bulwarks. Our little boat astern was having a bad time, the broken water from our wake striking her full and flying up in two white spouts of foam on each bow, but for the long towing line she must have be swamped.

I now noticed that the lugger was very much larger and more heavily armed than those I had often seen appear and disappear in so quiet and mysterious a manner in our cove. She mounted no less than eight small six-pounder guns on a side, besides several little swivel guns fixed to the bulwarks. There was a good pile of round shot round the main hatch, and each gun had its side arms, sponge, rammer and worm, besides handspikes, lashed alongside. The crew was about fifty, sturdy, dark-looking ruffians. Their broad belts, each with a cutlass, were piled up in the longboat amidships, and long pistols and musket were laid against the masts and on the hatchways. Luckily for us, as it turned out, only the captain wore his arms, but for this carelessness, and want of discipline, neither of us would ever have come out of this scrape alive.

Presently the captain turned to Jim, and what he said put me into a pretty tear. Says he: "Ze mill at dis Lannacombe, you know it, eh? goot. At dis mill one misare, one old smuggler lives he not? Vraiment, goot also. Dis misare has he not one, deux, trois boxes all of gold well filled, eh? Tres bon, I come, listen mine young friend, you take mine ship in, you show me to dis mill, in ze fog we creep, creep up to him, again tres bon. Ah na! I take ze monish, and to you mon garsong I give, yes, yes give one geld piece."

What Jim said in reply, I don't know, for the shock I got sent everything spinning round, lugger, sky, sea, and all, so that for some seconds I was giddy and stupid. Presently, however, my mind began to clear. So this rascal, then, was on a voyage if plunder, and instead of being a friendly smuggler as I thought, he was on his way to rob and murder. By some means or other he had got to know of my father's boxes of money, and taking advantage of the fog he meant to surprise the mill. That my father would never give up his money without a fight,

I was quite sure and what would that end in? One man against fifty. These Frenchers would think no more if knocking us all on the head then we should of killing a pig. And we were to pilot this villain into the cove for this evil purpose! No wonder I turned sick.



Painting of a Chasse Marée by an unknown artist [internet image]

Chapter V

The coast looking west with Gammon Head on the right and Bolt Head in the distance
Photo: Roger Barrett

Well, I very soon began to pull myself together and try to think what was to be done. How was I to get ashore? And if I did manage it, how could I reach home in time to warn my old Dad? There seemed only one chance – I could swim like a fish. In the thick fog we must certainly run very close in before we made the land and, during the confusion of putting the lugger about, which would have to be done quickly, I might quietly slip overboard without being seen. According to my calculations we should strike the land somewhere about Prawle Head. If off the Head itself then my fate would be pretty certain, for the flood tide, now running in full force, was sweeping round the Salcombe Bay and pouring out past the Head away south-east into the Channel, a race that no swimmer could live in.

My only hope was that we might make our landfall further west under the Gammon or Dickter's Head, where the tide would be slacker and then there would be a chance, though a poor one, of my getting ashore. But even there I should have five miles of rough country to get over before reaching the mill. It was a poor business, but still something might delay the lugger. Anyhow, I made up my mind to try it.

The Frenchers were all clustered forward peering out into the fog for the first sight of land, so I had no difficulty in unlacing my heavy boots and dropping these over the stern without

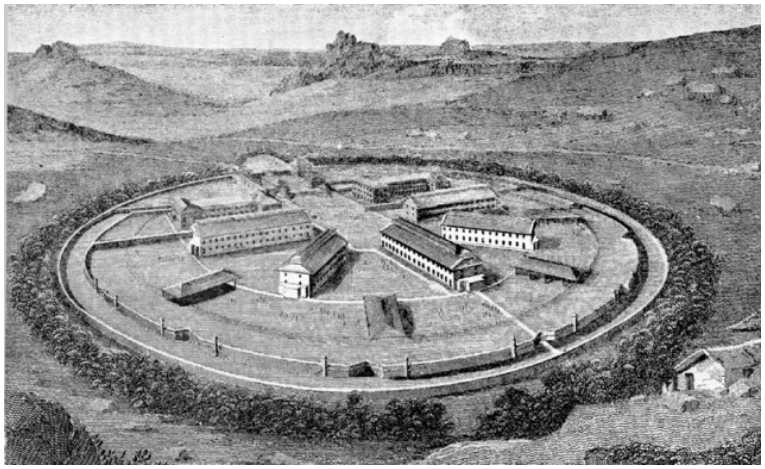
being seen. When doing so another idea occurred to me – our boat was towing with a long line and was at times almost lost to view in the thick fog, only the white mass foam under each bow showing through the gloom as she rode high on the crest of the long roll of sea. The line was made fast to a cleat close at hand in the stern. I could easily, when their backs were turned, slip the ripe off and go over the stern with it and in a moment the lugger at such a pace, would be lost to view.

The next thing was to warn Jim, if possible, of my plan and then wait for the first dim view of land so that I might have an idea of whereabouts we were. Jim was standing just in front of me, his long legs sprawling across the deck and holding the tiller hard with both hands. The crew were, as I said, all clustered forward in the bows and some even on the heel of the bowsprit, so eager were they to get a glimpse of the shore. The skipper was standing by the main rigging with his back to us, so now was a good chance.

Jim's ears must have been pretty good to hear me creep up behind him, but hear me he did, for without ever turning his head he said in a low whisper before I could say a word: "I be a-going to stick her right a top of the Mag. Stand by to go overboard and swim for it. Now get 'ee back, don't let um see us a-spaking." Well I tumbled back pretty sharp to my place in the stern with my ideas all in a heap again.

This plan of Jim's beat mine hollow, although goodness knows mine was daring enough. Stick her on the Mag indeed! Why ten to one the skipper would shoot us both before we could get over the side. I confess my heart went down into my boots, or would have done so only that they were now at the bottom of the sea. I was afraid of the dark water and the roaring tide, and the long struggle if I should drown. But the Frenchman's pistol was worse still and if he got the chance there would be a bullet apiece for us for certain. Had we only listened to mazy Bob, we should never have got into this mess.

Jim's idea was evidently to run between the Mag and the shore, through the narrow rocky channel not fifty yards wide, and suddenly luff up when nearly abreast of the Mag, which would be covered with about five feet of water, trusting that amongst all the broken water in the race, and the fog, the Frenchers would not notice the sea which would be breaking over the rock. But of this I felt more than doubtful and if they saw through our game there would be an end of both of us. Well, anyhow, come what might, I must stick to Jim and well it was for all of us in the end that this fisher-boy thought up a plan worthy of Lord Nelson and carried it out as the great Admiral would have done himself. We saved our lives and the old Dad's money and we left the old rotten lugger amongst the crabs and oarweed at the bottom and those Frenchers spent many a year up in Dartmoor Prison, where they had fogs enough and to spare.



Dartmoor Prison as it was when first occupied in 1809. This was 13 years after the 'Frenchers' were captured, so Shaw is wrong in saying that they were sent there. [internet image

Chapter VI

Gammon Head. Photo: Roger Barrett

The wind had now freshened so much that the lugger was tearing through the water with a great roaring sea on either bow and a wake running off into the fog astern. To approach our iron coast at this pace was a great risk, although the faster the ship goes the quicker she answers her helm. However, Jim (partly, as he told me afterwards, to deceive the Frenchers with an appearance of great care) sang out: "Monsoor, us must reef that main lug, us be a-going too vast, and us will hev to go about main sharp when us ketches the land."

"Goot, goot, vraiment," said the skipper, then followed a shouting and jabbering more than enough for putting a 74 about, the big main lug was lowered, and two reefs taken in and again hoisted. Then said Jim: "Get ‘ee furard, Jack and sing out where us be. When 'ee sees the land, look out main sharp."

"Goot, goot again," said the captain and I was bundled forard right in the eyes of her, all amongst the crowd of Frenchers. Standing as I was close to the stem of the ship, on each side of me rose a roaring mass of broken water, now level and sometimes coming over the rail as the following sea lifted her stern high and buried half her bowsprit in the water, at times sinking away as the great roller passed under us and her bow rode high. In front all was fog and gloom with dabs of white breaking waves dimly seen.

How long we all stood straining our eyes I cannot say, sometimes a thickening and deepening of the mist almost deceived me into thinking I saw the land. Presently however, there was no doubt about it, for suddenly right ahead rose a great black shadow, darker at its

base, and I sung out, "Land right ahead" at the top of my voice. Jim's answering "Ay, ay" was nearly drowned by the outburst of yells and the wild hubbub of excitement from the Frenchers, then I felt the vessel come a little up to the wind, and heard Jim sing out, "Stand by to go about, monsoor, sharp too, toot sweet." "Wee, wee " replied the skipper, and then all the row began again worse than ever. During this time, I had my eyes fixed on the land, trying to make some sort of a guess as to whereabouts we were, for nothing is so deceiving, as a fog. Rocks, points and headlands one knows so well are distorted and exaggerated out all recognition. At first there was nothing but a black wall lost about fifty feet above the sea in fog and whirling cloud, whilst at its base shot up great spouts of foam. Right onto this hard bed the lugger was rushing and even the Frenchers seemed to be holding their breath for now all was quiet again, and I heard Jim sing out clearly: "Say when 'ee sees where us be."

A few yards more and us must either come to wind or go ashore, then there came into view high up a great round lump of rock which could not be mistaken, hanging almst over our heads was the old rough Gammon. "Gammon Head" Jim, I yelled, and turning ran aft at my best speed. As I spoke I saw Jim jam down the helm and the lugger spun round like a top with a roll as she came broadside to sea which sent me sprawling away to leeward all amongst the men's legs as they hauled in like mad at the sheets of the great lugs.

My dear life, what a thundering the great sails made as they flapped in the wind and how the ship pitched as she came head to sea, pointing her bowsprit now at the sky, now half its length under water. If we missed stays it would be all up with the old hooker – we were too close in to stay again, to wear was impossible. I crawled from under the Frencher's legs all ready to go over the side if the skipper pulled out that vile pistol, but she was too smart a craft and too well handled to miss and in a few seconds we were standing off to the westward of south as close to the wind as she could lie. Jim only held onto this course for about three hundred yards, enough to weather the big rock lying southwest of the Gammon, but even so short a distance was enough for us to lose sight again of the land, this was now of no consequence. About we went again, (and I must give the Frenchers credit for being smart enough) heading away about southeast for Prawle Head, distant half a mile.

So well did Jim judge his distance, that a big sea burst over the sunken rock as we passed it, not twenty yards under our lee. Jim had now, by his careful and clever handling of the lugger, completely deceived the skipper into perfect confidence in him, and when he saw this great, roaring, white mass so close aboard but so safely passed, he nodded his head and said: "Goot boy, goot pelot."

But now I felt that our hour of trial was near. A few moments more and we should be past the head. A mile beyond was the Mag. In half an hour or less, either we should he dead on the deck, or swimming for life in the wild, dark water. I got back to my old place in the stern close to the cleat to which our boat's towing line was made fast, but my head began to get muddled with excitement and fear and my knees to shake and knock together.

Very soon right ahead rose again the dim black shadow, and then the dark rocks, and we were flying through the roaring tide-race close under the Prawle. My! how the lugger rolled and pitched in the cross-sea that broke aboard on all sides, now coming in over the starboard quarter, nor over the port. Our poor little boat had a hard time to live at all, towing at such a pace through such a tumble. Our gear and bream must be washing about in her by this time, the water would be over the bottom boards.

A few minutes more and we were through the race and in the eddy. Above us, and not twenty yards off, was the grand old Head with its arched rock and the hole right through. Should I ever see its weather-stained old face again? Past the head on our port or landward side was a deepish bay running up to Lanty Cove where the Prawle crabbers keep their boats This bay was about a quarter of a mile across, and on the opposite side was the long low reef of rocks,

off the end of which, and separated from it by a narrow, rocky channel, was the island rock, the dreaded Mag now covered by about five feet of water and a furious tide.

In crossing the bay, we again lost sight of the land, and when we should make it again, then our time was come. Suddenly Jim sang out (and how I wondered at his steady voice): ‘Kape a sharp look out on the port side for land, Moose," waving his arm in that direction. This was enough to send all the Frenchers to the side, eager enough to look out. The Mag, however, would show on our starboard side as we ran through the channel between it and the land If their attention could only be fixed on the wrong side, we had a chance.

Now I began to pull myself together, and first of all, just before the dim outline of the rocks began to appear, I quietly cast off the end of the towing line from the cleat, and our boat was adrift. Then I crept up close to Jim. He stood firm as a rock but I could hear his breath come quick and hard. Slowly there crept up on the port side the dark shades of the rocks, and the long line of white breakers at their feet. A shouting and jabbering and all the Frenchers were pointing at it. "Ay, ay" sang out Jim, and this time his voice was hoarse and shaky, "Kape your eyes on it mensoos, don't let us get no closer." "Wee, wee, goot, goot " said the skipper, and all hands were again leaning over the port side.

Now I looked out ever the starboard bow into the wild tumbling seas looking for the great, broad mass of foam breaking over the shoal water. There it was on our starboard bow but still dim in the fog, a great mass of broken sea as big as our farm court. I watched it grow clearer and clearer, rising in lumps and masses and sinking away like a great boiling copper of soapsuds. Nearer yet and the noise began to sound above the roar of the tide-race. Nearer still, and Jim began to edge up towards it, his hands shook on the tiller and I could hear him groan and gasp. As for me, my teeth rattled in my head and my heart seemed to stop beating. Only fifty yards more and the lugger’s fate is sealed, but even if Jim let the helm go even now, she would broach too of her own accord and run slap on the rocks before they could keep her away again.

A sudden sharp, startled yell form the crew and the captain spun round like a top. One look forward, and he turned to us. Something in our faces (mine must have been white enough) told him our purpose plain enough for with a fierce French curse his hand went to his pistol stock. Then suddenly, quicker than a flash of lightening came into my head an idea which I believe saved Jim's life.

The Frencher was not three yards off, his bandy legs wide apart as he balanced himself to the motion of the lugger, which, as Jim edged up for the rock, had the wind well over to the starboard side making her heel over to leeward. Before he had half drawn his weapon, putting my head down, I dived right between his legs and on my hands and knees tried to lift him upwards. This I could not do, but the force and suddenness of my charge carried him off his legs and he fell face downwards on the deck with fearful force whilst I sprawled out flat with his heels kicking against my head. At the same time his pistol went off, but I knew his aim was spoilt. In a second I was on my feet, but none too soon for the crew were rushing aft, several already almost within reach of me. One wild leap aided by a heavy roll of the lugger as she broached to and I was on the lee rail now almost buried in the water. Then I was overboard, but even when rolling anyhow over the side I caught a glimpse of Jim's long legs flourish in the air for a moment above the stern and then the roaring sea closed over my head.

Chapter VII

Well was it for both of us that on the long summer days we used to dive for the white pebbles at the bottom of Ivy Cove and try which could stay longest and swim furthest under water. Fifteen to twenty yards both could do at a pinch and this was a pretty hard pinch now. The lugger would go twice that distance in the time, so that when I must come to the surface there would be a good thirty yards between us and a boy's head in such a tumble of breaking sea and fog was a small and difficult target to hit. Also by that time the old lugger would be smashed on the rocks and the Frenchers would have something else to think about, so I no longer feared their pistols.

How long I was under I can't say and my first breath of air was only a gasp and under again. I was afraid to do more than just poke my mouth out of the water to give a puff like a porpoise however small. As it was it gave me a yard it two more below and then up I came. For a few seconds, what with water running into my eyes and a big sea breaking right over my head and nearly drowning me, I could not see much, but riding up high on a wave and turning to look behind I saw the lugger plain enough some twenty yards away and getting dim in the fog.

There was nothing to be feared from the Frenchers for certain, they had plenty else now to think of. Right on the Mag they were, a little on the western side too, which made their position worse if possible. Off her hard bed she would never come again. The bowsprit had broken clean off with the shock of striking; also the mainmast, which was only a few feet above the deck. The great main lug with the mast and its gear was churning about under the lee striking her with the force of a battering ram. She had fallen over so much to port that all the lee rail and three or four planks of the deck were under water. The crew were all crowded round the longboat, except two or three who were crawling up the steep deck out of the flood of broken water to leeward where they had been pitched.

Even as I looked a great white wall rose up over her starboard side, burying for a moment the whole hull. The foremast broke off short with a crash, pieces of rotten bulwarks were tossed into the air, and then a great sea broke over me again and drove me under. Now I had something else to think about than the Frenchers. Never had it been my evil chance to have to fight against such a tumble of breaking waves and rushing tide as this. Only at times could a breath of air be had between the cataracts of water which poured over me from all sides. Presently, what with being tossed and tumbled about and the fight for air, I lost all idea of the direction of land. Whether I was swimming for it or straight out to sea I could not tell. My brain began to get dizzy and confused and my mind to wander. Horribly afraid I was without doubt and it was only by a violent effort that I pulled myself together again.

To swim in any one direction was evidently hopeless; to keep my head above water by striking downwards and treading water hard was all I could do. The tide was running straight for the Pear Tree and Start. There it would meet the great stream running away south-east out into the open Channel, but long before it reached so far, I should be down amongst the crabs and bream and congers.

Suddenly through the fog came a dim object, now lost then appearing thrown high up on the steep sea, a boat with its mast shipped. At first I thought it was the lugger's longboat, if so, the crew in her would not be likely to pick me up, rather they would hit me over the head with a paddle and put me out of my great misery, but the next time I caught a sight of her my heart gave a great leap. It was our own boat which I had cast adrift and was sweeping down before the wind and tide. In the wild work of the last few minutes I had clean forgotten that the boat was adrift somewhere to windward. The tide setting off strong out of Lanty Cove bay had pushed her clear of the rocky point opposite the Mag on which the wind would otherwise have drifted her. Standing up with the paddles ready shipped was old Jim, looking first one way and

then another, evidently trying to find me. With more sense than I he had doubtless waited for the boat to drift down on him, instead of wearing himself out in a hopeless struggle for the shore. As I rose up on the crest of a wave, half smothered by the foam and saw the boat and Jim so close, I gave a yell which must have been heard at Prawle village.

Jim slewed round in an instant and caught sight of me just as I fell away again into the deep valley of water, but I heard his answering shout and when the sea lifted me again there he was, hard at work at the paddles. But now to my horror I saw that the wind and tide were drifting him so fast that he would go past me to leeward before I could reach the boat. His efforts with the paddles (the boat waterlogged as she was) were of little use. In a few moments the fog would shut us out from sight of each other again. Suddenly he dropped his paddles and jumped up forward with our old black basket in his hand. This was quickly made fast to the towing line, and rapidly making a coil of rope in one hand he flung the basket as hard as he could towards me.

Ivy Cove. Beyond is Lannacombe Bay and Pear Tree Point. Photo: Roger Barrett

Chapter VIII

The boat was still a little to windward of me but drifting rapidly past, the breeze having a strong hold on her mast and side, but the basket falling into the water only a yard or two out of my reach had only the drift of the tide, for Jim slacked away the line as the boat went to leeward. Therefore, if I could only reach the basket before all the line was payed out, I was safe.

Short as was the distance, it was almost too much for my last bit of strength. However, one final fight and struggle with the breaking sea thundering and roaring in my ears and over my head and then my fingers touched the rim of the old basket. Next a firm grasp of the handle, and then everything went out altogether. When my senses began to come back in a muddled kind of way, Jim was holding on to the back of my jersey and my hands were gripping fast to the gunnel of the boat. All misty and confused everything looked. Jim's voice sounded very far off and queer. "Get back aft " he said, pulling me towards the stern, then pushing an oar out of the sculling chock and between my legs. By bearing down on his end with his knee across the paddle he lifted me up level with the stern. Another haul and I tumbled head first into the boat.

When I began to come right again there was Jim sitting opposite to me looking very green and queer and the water up over the bottom-boards (which were all afloat) washed first over my legs and then over his as we sat all in a heap – water, bream, gear, bait and basket all washing about together, the whole sea and sky, boat and Jim spinning round and turning red and going out and then coming back. However, this soon began to pass off and my senses to come back, so that when Jim struggled to his feet and fell head first over the thwart on his way forward, I knew he was going to set the sail and made an effort to get up into the stern sheets and find the tiller, the rudder luckily being shipped.

Jim only cast loose the sail, not trying to sprit it up, and tumbled aft again with the main sheet. The sail set "goose-winged", as we say, was enough for us in so strong a breeze, but the boat would not look well up to the wind with it. Still I reckoned we were to windward of Ivy Cove and Jim thought so too, for he said: "Reckon us'll fetch Barlsaddle Rocks yet."

Then he looked at me and grinned, saying: "Us sarved they Frenchers out proper, sure enough. Hap you hadn't a'capsized that there old skipper he'd a-blawed my brains out, now he won't taste pay soup no more."

"Why not" says I, "he warn't hurted much, such a knack on the haid bain't nothing to the likes of he". "Aw" says Jim, "but he shooted hisself, I seed the blid a'rin on the decks afore I gaws overboard. But there be the land, sure enough, Barlsaddle Rocks too; kape her away Jack, kape her away. Us'll be into Ivy Cove yet. Ain't even lest our braame, think of the likes of that." Presently he said again, "Jack, I be best man still. I've got my buits which you bain't. I'll rin up to the mill and you follow arter. Us must make fast a stone of ballast, for our killock be gone, and moor the boat off and swim ashore."

By the time we rounded the point of rock and ran into the cove, Jim had made fast a big stone of ballast and, as I luffed up, dropped it overboard with a short range of line so that the boat lay at anchor only a few yards from the shore, on which there was now a great run caused by the sea outside.

No sooner had Jim thrown out the stone than over he went into the water, and scrambled ashore. Off he went up the beach with a staggering kind of run. Knowing he would reach home long before I could, I stopped to lash the sail, stow the gear and throw the bream one after another ashore, the black basket following, then overboard I went too. Picking up the fish, I stowed them in the basket under a great seaweed-covered rock before setting off as fast as shaky legs would carry me for the mill. Having no boots and the stones being sharp, I did not get on very fast, especially as the ground twice seemed to come up and hit me on the head, whilst the old Pear Tree and the other hills seemed to be waltzing round and at times pitching like a ship at sea.

However, before half the distance was over, there came a great uproar down the lane in front and mazy Bob, mounted on our old cart horse, appeared tearing along at full gallop. Taking my collar, he swung me up behind him and, turning the old mare round, started back again at the same break-neck speed, so that I had to hold on tight round his waist. No doubt being under the belief that a whole ship's crew of Frenchers were following us, he never left off beating, kicking and shouting until we reached the yard where the old horse pulled up so suddenly that mazy Bob shot right off into the straw heap, I of course following.

In the house there was only old Bob's missus, no signs of father and Jim. The old woman seemed quite silly with fear and was running up and down the kitchen, crying: "Aw, dear, dear, they Frenchers be come sure enough; us be all murdered and Maister Jack he be drownded for sartin, lor, how afeared I be." Bob stood at the door staring at me with his mouth wide open as if I was a ghost, rubbing his head every now and then and saying: "Aw, my dear life. The likes of this now." He was covered all over with mud and bits of straw from his roll in the yard. I sat in the window seat and began to think. Since the morning years must have passed. Only an hour ago I had no idea nor hope of ever seeing the old home again and sitting there with the splashing of the wheel, the rushing of the stream, the quacking of the ducks and all the old familiar sounds again around, why surely I should wake up and find it had all been a dreadful nightmare.

But before many seconds had passed, Father and Jim came in quickly from the garden. There was a dark, fierce look on the man's face which I had never seen before, but he was quite quiet as he always was. Going to the cupboard he poured out something from a bottle into a glass and made me drink what seemed to be fire, for it burnt me all down inside. However, in an instant I felt quite myself. Father stood and watched me for a moment and then said: "Jack, tell me what the Frenchman was like."

I described him much as I did to you and Father nodded his head as I went on, saying nothing only the evil look on his face got darker and a red spot came in each cheek under his eyes and above his great black beard and a great vein swelled out on his forehead a dark purple.

I do not think I told you that Father was not a Devonshire man, no one seemed to know where he came from, he had none of our ways of speaking, indeed, when he did speak, which was seldom, it was after the manner of educated men whom I met in after years. When I had finished, he turned to Jim and said: "What makes you think he shot himself, Jim? Are you quite sure?

"Iss, Meister, I be for sartin" said Jim, "He was a-fetching out his pistol and her was half out of his belt when Jack he pokes his haid right a-twicks his legs and capsizes of him right on his knawse. I heard the pistol go bang, and seed the blid rin on the decks. He's shooted, maister, sure enough."

Father turned to mazy Bob who was still standing at the door rubbing his head, and taking him by the shoulder gave him such a shake that his teeth rattled in his head and his eyes nearly started out, "Listen you old donkey" said Father, "pull your wits together man, can you understand yet? "

"Iss, iss, Maister, iss; fay I do, don't shake mun so" gasped old Bob. "Then" says Father, "get on the old horse and off you go to Salcombe, not too fast or the old mare will drop dead before you get there. Go aboard the War Schooner, she's anchored off Ditch End. Sing out as loud as you can from the beach, and they'll send a boat ashore for you. Tell the Captain there's a French privateer ashore on the Mag and that the crew will be putting to sea in their boat if they can. Do you understand so much? If so, go off with you."

Bob shot out of the house as if fired out of a gun. I think he was thankful to be ordered off and away from the Frenchers whom he evidently expected to see coming down the lane every minute. Before ten seconds had passed we heard him clattering and shooting full tear up the lane for Chivelstone. "The fool" grumbled Father, "the horse won't reach halfway at that pace".

Then he turned to the old woman who was still running about the kitchen jabbering to herself. "Now Missus" said he, "don't you stay here another minute. Be off to Hallsands as fast as you can, and send all the men on to Prawle. Tell they to keep a good look out on the way for the Frenchmen.” I think the old lady was too frightened to understand half he said, except that she had better clear out to Hallsands, for she was out of the house and up the road without stopping to put on her bonnet even.

"All right" said Father, "she’ll raise the whole hillside. Now look here boys, I am off to Prawle to look for this lugger as fast as I can. Do you change your clothes and come on too. If those Frenchers should get ashore and pay the mill a visit, they won't be best pleased with you. I know that French rascal. He'd think no more of shooting you than if you were rats. So don't be caught here and keep a good look out along the road as you follow me. If anyone shows up, run away up the hills, they would never catch you in the fog. Now I’m off".

So saying, he took down a long ship's musket, which always hung over the fireplace, together with an old sailor’s ammunition pouch and belt with a cutlass in the frog and in a few moments he was lost in the fog down the combe.

The Shipwreck. Painting by Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky

Chapter IX

Horseley Cove, looking east to Pear Tree Point. Photo: Roger Barrett

Well, the first thing we did was to run up into my room for some dry clothes. I rigged Jim out in an old pair of trousers and guernsey of my own, and a pretty figure he looked, for he was long and thin like a dogfish, whilst I was as short and fat as a bream, so a foot of bare leg stuck out below his breeches and six inches of thin arm out of his sleeves.

We were bundling down stairs fast enough (for the truth was, the mill did not seem a very safe place to bide in) when my eye caught sight of the open cupboard in the kitchen with the cold pork and bread crying out to be eaten. We were hungry enough for all our dinner had been spoilt with salt water and was washing about in the bottom of the boat in Ivy Cove.

Well, it did not take long for Jim to catch up the pork whilst I shoved a loaf of bread under my arm and so loaded off we trundled down the lane towards Lannacombe, keeping a sharp look out, you may be sure, in case the Frenchers had had luck enough to get on land.

The fog was as thick as ever and as we passed Ivy Cove the boat was hardly visible, but we could just see she was riding safe to the stone. After passing Ivy Cove the coast grows more rugged and the steep rocky hills draw closer to the edge of the low cliffs. Here great lumps of rock have rolled down and are strewn all about covered with yellow lichen. A mile of scrambling over these with a fall or two into the bracken and we reached Horseley Cove,

The little village of Prawle lies back from Horseley about half a mile, on the top of very high ground. In this Cove the Frenchers would most likely have landed if they got ashore at all, for from the western side of the cove the rocks run out in a spit or point some two hundred yards long off the end of which, separated from it, as I have before said, by a narrow channel, lies the Mag.

However, all was quiet and no sign of Frenchers and so we started out over the low, rough rocks and through the gullies and pools of water towards the outer edge. Presently several dim figures showed up through the fog close in front and stowed away behind a long flat rock over which they were evidently looking out to seaward as hard as they could. Scrambling up behind them we found Father and half a dozen fishermen from Prawle, most of them armed in some fashion or another with knives and boathooks and a pitchfork or two.

Beyond the rock all was mist, but the sea was roaring and crying close by and every now and then a great mass of foam flew up like a pillar and this the wind swept down over the rock into our faces.

Father said they had not seen nor heard anything, so Jim and I stowed ourselves away in a sheltered gully out of reach of the break of the sea, and set to at the pork and bread. Afterwards, being pretty well tired out as you may suppose, I soon fell off into a doze, for how long I can't say, but a kick from Jim woke me up sharp enough. The wind had caught in to the north-west and the fog showed signs of lifting, indeed inland I could see the great grey lump of rocks above Horseley Cove suddenly show up out of the mist. At the same time several voices sang out sharply: "There her be." Scrambling up amongst the group of men which had now increased to more than twenty, I looked out seaward over the rock. There was the remains of the lugger sure enough and plainly to be seen just where I last saw her, only now she was nearly smashed up, every breaking sea sending great pieces of rotten planks into the air as the water forced through her broken starboard side, burst up the decks. Her black bare ribs stuck up in places like the bones of a skeleton and still fastened to the chain-plates in them by the rigging, the masts and spars bobbed about to leeward in the boil of white water. Then the fog settled down again and hid her once more.

"Aw" said Sam Pepperell of Prawle, "there her be, sure enough. Massy dear! Her be knacked all abroad! Where be her crew to, I wanders? If so be as them put to say, they'll be blawed up around Start into the stream and drownded for sure".

"Aw well, let un"says Bill Distin, "I never did hold with they Frenchers, us won't miss un. But this 'ere ebb be taking all the wrack away to say, us won't get none, aw dear, dear, the likes of ut. But look out, the vog be lifting again". Sure enough the sky cleared suddenly and from the west the afternoon sun shot a long yellow gleam under the flying scud, lighting up the bright green water and white wave tops in the tide race. "There they bee's" sang out Sam again, "there away purty nigh to Pear Tree. I see's un right in the race, tew, with a say-anchor down for sartin".

Away to leeward, only visible for a moment now and then amongst the wild turmoil of the tide was the longboat full of men. As Sam said, they had got out a sea-anchor, that is, the masts, sails and oars all tied together and thrown overboard, the boat riding to it with a long line, the raft breaking the sea and keeping the boat head to the waves.

"Here her comes" sang out old Jack Varner, "see to mun, see to mun round Prarle Haid with a bawn in her mouth, hooray!"

Sure enough, there was the War Schooner shoving through the tide at a great pace; a broad white wave across her bow and rising up over her head-board at each dip, the "bone in her mouth" as the old sailors say. As the weather cleared she clapped on all the sail she would stand: topsail, topgallantsail, jib and whole mainsail, and came roaring past us, a grand sight!

Up on the rocks all of us danced, cheered and waved our hands towards the French boat, but the hands aloft had evidently spied her out, for the schooner kept away, giving us a dip of the ensign at the gaff peak as she passed.

Presently came a puff of white smoke from her weather bow and the distant report of a gun and then she shortened sail and rounded to leeward of the poor Frenchers.

Well, to shorten this long yarn, she picked the Frenchers all up (as we heard next day) and kept away for Dartmouth, where Jim and I had the pleasure of seeing our old friends marched off on the way up to Dartmoor Prison, all except the skipper – he had shot himself in the leg, and although he recovered, it was with a limp for life to remind him of me.

So Jim saved Father's money, but, as after events happened, it would have been better if we had thrown it all into the sea. Someday, perhaps, I shall tell you how this same gold cost Father his life, and drove me out to spend fifty years on the great ocean.

Prawle Point from Langerstone Point. Photo: Roger Barrett

Appendix

Local Seascape Paintings by Walter J. Shaw

Above: Coastline between Salcombe Estuary and Prawle Point. [The Box, Plymouth]
Below: The Edge of the Reef. [The Box, Plymouth]

Above: Bolt Head, South Devon. [Herbert Art Gallery and Museum]
Below: The Bar, Salcombe. [The Box, Plymouth]