

**ALAIN OF
HALFDENE.
PP. 435-602**

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Alain of Halfdene. pp. 435-602 by Anna Robeson Brown

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ANNA ROBESON BROWN

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ALAIN OF HALFDENE.



BY

ANNA ROBESON BROWN,

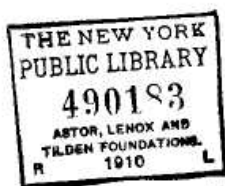
AUTHOR OF "A FELINE FATE," "A BEGGING LETTER," ETC.

For yet to laugh is somewhat, and to weep,
To feel delight of living, and to plough
The salt-blown acres of the shoreless deep.



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ALAIN OF HALFDENE.

CHAPTER I.

I AM SENT FOR.

THE morning after my return from the Bahamas, I got a communication from the owner of the ship which I commanded, requesting an immediate interview with me. It was a fair day in early June. My schooner, the Bunker Hill, lay at ease in the Delaware, while a score of porters were busily unloading her cargo, sending it to shore in small boats. I was not best pleased at this note of Mr. Lyndale's, for I had been over three months absent from home, and would have liked a few days' leisure wherein to attend to my own matters. But I had no choice; so, after seeing the unloading of the Bunker Hill well under way, I betook myself to Mr. Lyndale's house.

My employer was a merchant, enriched first by East India and China trade, and later by advantageous bargains with the government during the late War of Independence. He was an excellent friend of Mr. Washington's, and in the town bore the reputation of a man of weight. For my own part, I had ever found him a just dealer, albeit one to drive a hard bargain when it was to his advantage, and this very commixture of shrewdness and liberality had gained him riches at no sacrifice of good will. Mr. Lyndale lived in a fine large house to the southward of Independence Square. The situation was considered a thought too far up town at the period (although I have lived to see it bear the opposite disadvantage), but it stood central, had wide gardens at the back, and moreover was but a stone's throw from the State-House. Newly landed as I was from the sea, the town air felt very sweet and mild to my nostrils, and hither I walked, glad that the earliness of the day ('twas but eight of the clock) prevented me from encountering any starers at my seaman's clothing. My thoughts were pleasant ones in the anticipation of a fortnight's idleness, and I felt joyful to

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be once more in company of my brother George, who was my only surviving relation. I knew, moreover, that the trade I had driven with the Bahamas had been an excellent one, and I half suspected that this interview with Mr. Lyndale might signify his approbation, or maybe an increase on my salary as master of his vessel.

Mr. Lyndale's mansion owned two entrances, one upon the square for his family's use, and one lower upon Fifth Street for those who came to transact business with him. This fashion, indeed, was needful, as he was forever engaging mariners, bespeaking ships, or entertaining merchants of all quality; and such a crowd, swearing, stamping, and chewing tobacco, would have created sad havoc in Mistress Lyndale's stately parlors. It was toward this lower entrance that I bent my steps, and had scarcely laid hand on the knocker when the door was opened by my patron himself. Mr. Lyndale was then in the fifty-eighth year of his age, of a mild benevolent countenance, yet bearing in his looks a certain pride and majesty. He was keen-featured, clean-shaven, with iron-gray hair that fell upon his collar, hands of a perfect whiteness, and a thin-lipped mouth that he had a way of primming like a girl. There was a deceiving gentleness in his face, not altogether the mettle of the man, which was indeed just, but as hard as stone; and in his black coat, unruffled, and with plain silver buttons, he had I know not what of a churchly appearance, so that a stranger would have sworn that he was in orders.

"You are prompt, captain. This is very well," he said, when I had doffed my cap and saluted him. "Come into the office at once, and let us to business."

Mr. Lyndale's house bore witness nobly to his wealth, but his office was that of a plain man who disliked frippery. It was well lighted, and the furniture exceeding solid and handsome, but without ornament. A clock stood in one corner, a tall press in another; the floor was uncarpeted, and the chairs were of leather. Upon a mahogany secretary which stood against the wall there was placed a decanter of sherry, a glass of which he offered me. This was so unlike his habit that, while I declined, not feeling in the humor for wine so early, I wondered vaguely what was in his thoughts. Upon my declining, he put himself into a chair opposite me, and fell to contemplating me for so long a time that I felt constrained to speak.

"I trust the trade was to your satisfaction, sir. There is not so much money in the Bahamas as formerly."

This I said to increase his notion of my shrewdness, since the prices I had brought home were fair for any trade.

"Very good, very good indeed," he said, starting as from a reverie; "clear gain from start to finish. Would I could say as much of the rest!" With this exclamation he stayed a moment silent, and then said,—

"Your ship, has it suffered in this last voyage?"

"Not more than one may repair with a day's work," I replied, but sorrowfully, for I feared his purpose was to send me forth sooner than I desired.

"I am in great perplexity, Captain Halfdene, in very great per-

plexity," he pursued; "and were I not convinced by past dealings with you that I might rely upon your energy, I should scarcely know where to turn. I did not, indeed, purpose to send the Bunker Hill forth so soon."

"But you do now, sir?" I ventured, seeing him hesitate.

"I fear I must; and yet, to be plain with you, it is not in the matter of trade I wish to send her, but on a totally different errand."

I suppose I showed my surprise here, for he added, hastily,—

"I must make all plain to you, Captain Halfdene, and show you my inmost confidence, of which I am sure you are worthy."

I bowed, and waited while Mr. Lyndale seemed seeking to cast his thoughts into language.

"You have heard," he said, finally, "of the Niobe?"

"The Niobe, Captain Morgan?" I replied, remembering a schooner he had of that name.

"That is the name, the devil's name!" he broke out. "To mince no words, captain, I have strong proofs that this same Morgan is a villain, and the Niobe with her cargo as good as lost."

"Lost, sir? how lost?" I inquired, wondering more and more.

Mr. Lyndale drew his chair near to me, and laid his hand upon the desk.

"The Niobe sailed from London six weeks ago," he said, "under charge of the man Morgan. She was laden with fine silks and mercers' goods by my brother, Mr. Benjamin Lyndale of London, letters of whom, though in a different hand, have but lately reached me. The weather has, as you know, been wonderfully mild and fair; incoming craft report fair winds and no sign of storms. The Niobe is newly and stanchly built; 'tis almost out of credence, save in case of fire, that she should come to harm. Yet I should be driven to think so,—there is indeed no other course open to me," he continued, sinking his voice, and striking the table with his open palm, "had I not received word yesterday, from my cousin Abraham Goodrich of Boston, that a sloop of his had sighted the Niobe, with which he is well acquainted, not two hours out from Martha's Vineyard, and making northward under all sail."

Had not respect for my patron forbade me, I should have whistled. This, then, was a matter of piracy we had to deal with. "There can be no mistake in the ship?" I asked.

"None," replied my employer. "Goodrich knows the Niobe, and, indeed, has often seen to her cargoes in Boston. Moreover, he read name and port plainly on her stern."

"Pardon, sir," I said: "had this Morgan your perfect trust?"

"Not wholly. I will not deceive you, captain; not my entire trust," he answered; "and yet I had no cause to suspect him of such black villainy as this. But do you see his drift? Once in the northern seas, or in the St. Lawrence, the Niobe is lost, and I must as well stand the loser for her cargo, which was of value."

"The Bunker Hill is a faster sailer than the Niobe," I cried, seeing his wishes at a glance.

"You understand? I can rely on you?" he said, delightedly. "But there must be no shifts, no delays, captain. This is a fair chance: do not waste it."

"I shall need one day," I replied, going over in my own mind the needs for such an expedition, "to victual the ship and make needful repairs. Better she should start in good case than break down in the heat of the chase. I shall want weapons, sir, and ammunition; these fellows are doubtless provided, and we should not be behind them."

"You shall have everything. State anything you wish," he returned, seating himself at his desk, and making note of the items.

"There are spars missing, and cordage. There should be new lockers in the forward cabin," I said, boldly asking for repairs I had long desired. "One of the life-boats is stove in: it should be replaced. We will need muskets and cutlasses for twenty men," I finished, and Mr. Lyndale wrote down my requirements.

"There is one thing more," I continued, with some hesitation. "This is an enterprise of some danger, sir, and I shall need a companion whom I can trust."

He turned, and fixed me with a look. "Beware of too much trust," he said, grimly, tightening his mouth. "But who is this companion?"

"My brother George, if you are willing, sir. I shall ask for nothing for him, but I should prefer his company on this occasion."

"Which is to say that you refuse to go without him," he said, smiling. "Very well, captain, have your brother along if you wish: only pray never put my vessel under the guidance of such an inexperienced youngster."

"I shall remember to take as good charge of your property as formerly," I answered, not angrily, for I knew the man. "And now, sir, I have the honor to wish you a very good morning, for I must see about this business."

"Wait a moment, Captain Halfdene," Mr. Lyndale said, as I arose to depart. "We have not spoken concerning your own share in this matter. I am ignorant of what is due in such a case, nevertheless I make this offer. Two thousand dollars if you regain the cargo of the Niobe, five thousand if you bring back the ship without the cargo, and ten thousand down if you succeed in saving both. Your salary, if you fail, shall remain at its present figure. Expenses, of course, if you should need help in Boston or elsewhere, are at my charge."

I thought this offer a very liberal one, and signified as much to my patron. With ten thousand dollars I might command my own ship and trade to my own advantage.

Mr. Lyndale discussed a few more details with me, such as the victualling and manning of the Bunker Hill, and then we parted, I betaking myself in all haste to seek my brother and let him know his share in the enterprise.