



JEAN BART'S MONUMENT IN THE GRAND PLACE, DUNKIRK.

A Corsair of the Dunes

The Story of a former Volunteer Fleet

By S.R.Crockett

First published in the Windsor Magazine XXIII (1905)



Twelve years of his age was Jean Bart when he set foot on the hip of Jerome Valbue, that angry Picard. Four years he endured hardness under his hand, and at the end of a knotted rope – but the fourth year saw an end of all that.

Jerome the Picard was a seaman much experienced, wise in his craft, but ungovernable of temper, bloodthirsty and sullen, a terrible man on board his ship to those who came under his ban.

With some philosophy young Jean took the bite with the buffet, but once only did he need to show his teeth to his captain.

‘Kill me if you will,’ he said, ‘only remember when you go back to Dunkirk town, there will be waiting one or two on the quay, by the Carillon Tower yonder, who may chance to ask you: ‘Jerome Valbue – what have you done with our little Jan?’

And indeed the brothers Cornil and Herman, father and uncle of the sturdy ‘prentice, had in their time been corsairs and privateersmen under half-a-dozen flags, and stood little upon ceremony when their own blood was concerned.

Said Uncle Herman: ‘Spanish was I born, and when I wedded the Sea Fox’s daughter, quote the Sea Fox to me: ‘If there arrives a misfortune, lie low, and in time you will draw from it good. There is honey in the carcass of every dead lion. Did not I, Old Janssen (whom, not without reason they call the Fox of the Sea), make my fortune by carrying the tatters of the Armada back to King Philip, what time God and English blew the great fleet to pieces?’

So it was this same Herman Bart who now said to Jerome the Picard: ‘If aught befall my nephew, your vessel and your goods shall be sold to pay the blood-money.’

But on his part, Cornil, the lad’s father, said only, as he stood on the quay: ‘Master Jerome Valbue, boys are boys and mind no better than the others. A rope’s-end in reason across this quarters will make a man of him. But keep your hand from your knife. Or – well, I am Cornil Bart of Dunkirk.’

So for four years Jean Bart sailed with Black Jerome the Picard, and had frequent reason to scratch his hams, finding the study of navigation hard, and the rope's-end sometimes used out of reason - that is, according to his thought of it.

But though he saw much rough work, and the flash of knives was no strange sight to him, yet till the fatal voyage of the *Fat Pig* (Captain Jerome Valbue) to watch the English guardships in the Straits, and to bring in stray Dutchment whom the Cinque Ports' cruisers headed off from Rotterdam and the Texel, this burly Jean had not much to complain of.

These were rough days, and our sixteen year old Jean, a tight and limber lad, made no bones about trifles. But what he saw that trip turned his stomach, and he resolved to part from Valbue without formal leave-taking just as soon as he could get one foot on land, even though he had to carry off all his worldly goods in his breeches' pockets.

The *Fat Pig* was a well-found, seaworthy boat, built to be the Dover packet, now a brigantine *garde-côte* of 120 tons, with eight hands, a mate, and a ship's boy. The 'boy' was by no means young Jean Bart, as might be supposed. On the contrary, so well had Jean profited by the rope's end, that at sixteen he was actually mate of the *Fat Pig*: and each noon saw him glue his eye to the sextant, while Jerome Valbue, a glass of schnapps in his hand, cursed Martin Lanoix, the Huguenot - who, in his turn, stood ready to write down the figures, a thing which, for all his smartness, Jean could not do. It was when they were out of sight of land that Captain Jerome was always the most ungovernable. But whenever they saw Cape Grisnez thrust his long grey snout into the sand-churned froth of the Mauche, or the towers of Dover Castle loom black against the sunrise like a little wiggle made with a pen, the Captain's anger dulled surprisingly. For he saw himself coming up to the quay of Dunkirk in the dawning, and heard these quiet brothers Herman and Cornil Bart, asking in a breath: 'What has you done with our little Jan?'

But there was one man who had no friends either on or off the *Fat Pig*. And that both because he would not drink, and on account of his religion - for that man was Martin Lanoix, a noted Huguenot. Also Martin irritated Captain Valbue because he was never angry. The Black Picard could not understand a man like that, nor know that the angers of such are the most terrible when at last their calm shivers, as a glass does on a marble floor.

Martin Lanoix's glass broke suddenly one summer morning as the *Fat Pig* was lying in a glimmering calm upon a mother-of-pearl sea, with the land shut out and the sun rimmed clear and small like a silver sixpence, pasted upon the sky and just about as bright.

'Barbets!' Foul dogs of Martin Luther and the foulest of them all is this Martin Lanoix!' So the Captain was crying to his first mariner across the deck.

'Gabbleers - Mass - mumblers - pigs of the Pope's sty!' retorted Martin Lanoix. 'At least we Huguenots have brains and think for ourselves occasionally, but you others only g-rrr-umph and stir up the hog-wash in the troughs.'

He had no time to add more.

Jerome Valbue, the Black Picard, was upon him. Crash went his fist straight in the seaman's face. Martin Lanoix withdrew into a corner, his eyes glittering.

'The Judgement of Oleron, master,' he said calmly. 'Remember that by the Law of Oleron the master shall not in his anger strike the mariner.'

Once and twice again the brute struck, but before the third blow could fall, the long Huguenot knife was out and as the master of the *Fat Pig's* hand descended, the blade transfixing his arm.

At the sight of the blood, one of the sailors on whom Jerome Valbue much depended precipitated himself towards the Huguenot to disarm him and throw him down. But, slipping on the deck, he fell forward on the red knife with a cry. When they turned him over, a film of glaze was already creeping over his eyes.

So they tied Marin the Huguenot up, who, as usual, said nothing. Nor did he say anything when the Captain cried for a deck council to judge him.

'He invoked the Law of Oleron,' he said: 'well, he shall have it. Every mariner by that Law is a judge out of sight of land. Here stands Martin Lanoix – here stand I, Jerome Valbue, with a knife-thrust through my arm.' (He tore the sleeve to show it them.) 'Now, did Martin Lanoix, aye or no, wound his captain to the effusion of blood?'

And he let the blood drip on the deck so that all might see the proof. There were but two who voted 'No' a certain sailor Vanburgh and Jean Bart. Six of the sailors voted 'Aye.' Then the Captain spoke again.

'Six sailors say that Martin Lanoix has wounded his captain, Jerome Valbue. Two say that he has not. Six are good against two. Let the punishment be inflicted.'

So the Captain took the long Cevenol knife, and fixing it in a crack of the main-mast, he loosed the Huguenot's right arm and bade them draw it across the blade till bone grated on steel. And so it was done, Martin Lanoix uttering no word.

'And now,' continued the Captain, 'this martin Lanoix, hath he, yea or nay, murdered Simon Laret who lies before you?'

'No!' said Jean Bart and Vanburg.

'Yes!' cried all the others.

'Six mariner,' cried the Captain 'say that Martin Lanoix hath slain his shipmate. Two say that he hath not. Six are good against two. It is a thing judged. Let him be punished.'

And at the word, six mariners, following the commandment of Jerome the Picard, bound Martin Lanoix back to back with the dead man and threw him living into the sea.

But when next the Fat Pig came to an anchorage, Jean Bart went ashore to denounce the deed, and that night he shipped on a Dutch lugger as a foremast hand, and was beating his way up towards the Texel in the teeth of as stiff a Norther as ever blew. But he was glad. His heart sang. For the deck-seams of the Fat Pig were lined red with the blood of the murdered Huguenot, and the crack in the main-mast in which the knife-blade had been thrust gave him the shivers every time he passed it.

So he wasn't to help the Dutchmen fight the English. For De Ruyter would certainly be glad of one who was equally ready with rope or with boarding-pike. And so for ten years Jean Bart fought the English and all the enemies of the States-General. He rose to be second lieutenant of the good ship the Gilded Duck. But when, in 1672, Holland declared war against France, Jean and his friend Charles Keyser stepped into a little fisher's boat and set sail for Dunkirk, resolved never to fight against what they considered to be their native land.

What is it that so quickly attaches all who have been citizens of France, for ever so short a time, to the national idea? These two youths, Jean Bart and Charles Keyser were Flemings, and sons of Flemings, reared under Spanish rule, and (save for one short interval of six years when the white flag of the Bourbons floated over the town) they knew nothing of France. Yet these young men, lieutenants in the first maritime Power in the worlds, threw up their commissions and were off to Dunkirk to fight for a flag that had never really been theirs, and a monarch whom, as good Flemish burghers and Spanish citizens, their fathers had hated and opposed.

Now, the Frenchman cannot colonise. The homeland tugs on the heart-strings too steadily. Like Ovid, he may be in banishment by the sad Euxine for a while, but the lights of the café and the click of the dominoes go on in his head, and presently you will find him back again behind the green *persiennes* of a little white house with a vineyard about it, saluting the peasant women as they pass on their way to market, who wonder vaguely where Monsieur Jules has been this long while. Or he saunters into the *cercle* of his political creed, and his comrades, grown somewhat greyer of head and thicker of girth, make room for him without once disturbing their game. The prodigal is home, but his waygoing was so

monstrous that even now he is not encouraged to say too much about it.

Though Louis the Great was generally victorious on land by reason of the services of a succession of great commanders, of whom Turenne and Conde were the first, and Marlborough's nephew, The Duke of Berwick, the last, he yet suffered defeat after defeat at sea. But young Jean Bart's Volunteer fleet, the Corsairs of the Dunes, redressed the balance or perhaps a little more. Almost they swept English and Dutch commerce off the narrow seas. In the ten years of war between 1688 and 1697, the English lost not less than 1,200 vessels of all sizes by the deeds of these privateers-men. No doubt most of the captures were little better than fishing-smacks, but still it is on record that the total amount of value adjudged by the Prize Court of Dunkirk during the forty years of sea warfare was no less than eleven millions sterling, equal to thirty millions today.

So at the age of twenty four behold Jean Bart, a full-blown Corsair Captain, sailing out of Dunkirk for the first time to do battle for his own purse, for the good townsman who fitted him out, and incidentally for King Louis, whose commission he carried in his pocket.

This predecessor of the *Smolensk*, the *Petersburg*, and the Black Sea fliers, was not much troubled by scruples. He had the ships of half Europe to pick and choose from. And, indeed, he spread his net very wide. His ship was the *King David*, a galliot of three hundred tons, rounded at stem and stern, slab-sided, drawing little water, but carrying two guns and a crew of thirty-six men. Her companion ship was the *Alexander*, Captain Charles Keyser. And so these two young Dunkirkers went off to harass their old friends the Dutch, whose goings out and whose incomings they knew so well.

They were not long in laying by the heels a heavier collier, the *Wild Man*, laden with English coal, which that winter burned bright in the fireplaces of Dunkirk. Next came the Adventure of the Friend, whose cargo of Spanish wines had a serious adventure with the throat of the enemy. Doubtless Jean Bart did his share. *The Saint Peter of Bruges* had no better luck, in spite of her ecclesiastical pretensions. One hundred and eighty and a half hogsheads of Bordeaux, to help digest the long Sunday afternoon dinners of Dunkirk, and a tun and a half of strong syrup-sweet Frontignan for special deserts, came out of the belly of the Saint Peter.

Young Jean's reputation was made, and was worth to him the commandment of a certain frigate of ten guns, the *Royale*, which was to bring him yet greater fame. The Gilded Ham, of the Greenland fleet, laden with whalebone and whale-oil, yielded only after the death of the captain at the end of a four hours' engagement. On this occasion Jean had about as much Dutch ham, gilded or not, as he could digest. So year by year Jean the Intrepid found himself in command of larger and larger ships. In the *Palme* (twenty-four guns, one hundred and fifty men) he took after a severe action the Dutch frigate *Neptune*, and towed it into the port of his native town, amid the acclamations of his fellow-citizens, whom this corsairing was making rich above all the *bourgeoisie* of France. The King himself sent Jean a gold chain 'in recompense of his fine action.'

About this time Financier Colbert had a list made of thirty-three corsair captains belonging to Dunkirk, and first are found the names of Jean Bart and his friend Charles Keyser. It is further observed that both are remarkable for the manner in which, when anything is to be attempted, they mingle familiarly with their equipage, both officers and men, and so, by stirring them up till all are of one mind, they are better followed than any other officers of the fleet.

Remark the names of the ships taken about that time. There was certainly imagination and a sense of the picturesque afloat. The *Gold Dust* brought down the *Gilded Falcon*. The *Damosel Christine* and the *Prophet Daniel* were equals in ill-fortune while, as they came from the frosty North, Muskovy furs and Archangel taqr had both to be sold by auction on the Dunkirk wharves. The *Goodwife of Wisby* and the *Dappled Crow*, the *Prince William* and the *Good Adventure*, the *Gilt Dolphin* and the *Short Nose*, the *Black Fly* and the *Henry Stern*, all went the same sorrowful way. No wonder rates of insurance mounted, and merchants were glad to raise temporary loans at ten per cent, on the flags of the London Exchange.

But peace came suddenly upon France – greatly, it must be said, to the sorrow of Jean Bart and his

townsfolk of Dunkirk. Indeed, Jean seemed only to flourish in war-time, for it was not long afterwards that fate bereaved him of his mother, his wife and his youngest child. It is difficult to get an impression of Jean as a mere man and an indweller of Dunkirk. In the record of his marriage he and his bride Nicole Gonthier are called 'two young people of Dunkirk.' Most other documents where his name occurs are filled with the lists of the Dutch ships he took in time of war, and with lamentations that the King would go signing treaties of peace which prevented so excellent a citizen from bringing back more.

Still, we may understand from the silence as to his home life during the long truces, that Jean Bart abode quietly enough in his own house, catted on the quay with his fellows, walked out his wife to the *digue*, or among the sandhills on Sundays, that he paid his civic dues, and whistled for a breeze.

However, under Louis the Great he never had long to wait. Even in the midst of his piping he managed to get a little commission, much in the way of Satan sent to reprove Sin, to go and rebuke the Mediterranean Corsairs of the Barbary Coast for the error of their ways. Cheered by this, he managed to put in the time till 1688, when the accession of William of Orange to the throne of England cause the war to break out fiercer than ever. Jean Bart's opportunity had come again. He was put in command of the *Railleuse*, while the chevalier Forbin was appointed to accompany him in the *Serpent*. However, Jean Bart understood discipline, though he did talk so familiarly with his crew. This man was sent by the King to act under his orders, and he was not long in giving the sneerer a taste of his quality.

At Forbin's very first impertinence Jean Bart marched straight up to him where he stood in the midst of a numerous group of well-born officers.

'I have something else to do than bandy words or scratch fleas with you,' he said; 'but take it once for all that I am not a man to suffer your sarcasms for a moment!'

So spoken. So taken. Forbin did not begin again, brave man as he afterwards proved himself to be.

There is always a refreshing directness about Jean, and his methods were distinctly persuasive. The first time that his son Francis-Cornil, the future Vice-Admiral, heard the whizz of a round shot, he turned pale. His father had been watching him and cried out at once: 'Tie him to the main-mast until his ears grow a little accustomed to that kind of music.'

And so all through the severe engagement that followed, the boy stood tied to the mast in the most exposed position in the ship. And the lesson was taught once for all.

For it was this same youth who guarded the powder-magazine with a lighted match when his father was commissioned by the King to convey the Prince of Conti to the Port of Dantzic, on his mission to take over the throne of Poland.

On their way Jean Bart sighted a great squadron of three first-rates and many frigates. Jean Bart prepared for combat, but finally, with guns shotted and matches burning, he won through the enemy's fleet by dint of a swift vessel and his excellent seamanship. It was a solemn moment for the King-Elect.

'If we had been attacked,' he said, 'we would surely have been taken.'

'Fear nothing,' said Jean Bart; 'you would never have been taken. All the time my son Cornil was in the powder-magazine ready to blow us into the air at the first signal.'

The which information comforted the future King but little.

Yet in spite of this readiness 'to make things jump' Jean the Redoubtable was taken by the English himself, his vessels, and his companion Forbin. All combated most valiantly, but in the end the islanders proved the stronger, and to Plymouth must Jean go. He was wounded and exhausted, so that, having pity on a sailor and a gallant man, the English confined him not in a prison, of which there were many in Plymouth, but only in a tavern with barred windows.

Here Jean and Forbin were attended by a Flemish doctor, who cared for their wounds and assisted them to plan their escape. Two cabin-boys of their ships were permitted to attend them, and no restrictions were placed upon the actions of these *mousses*. So Jean Bart and Forbin were soon furnished with files

wherewith to cut the bars of their windows, covering up the marks of their labours with chewed bread mixed with soot in the accredited way. The *mousses* kept their eyes about them and soon found a drunken Norwegian skipper, who had come ashore in his boat, and now lay in it, as they descriptively said, *ivre-mort*. Him they conveyed to a neighbouring building and laid away to sleep out his drunken sleep.

Then having moored the small boat in a neighbouring creek, the boys waited the proper hour of night, when they repaired to the tavern-prison. This cannot have been very carefully guarded, for they found no difficulty in 'chucking' a pebble up to the prisoners' window. Accordingly Jean and Forbin descended by the aid of their blankets and all were soon in the stolen long-boat. Into this 'the necessities of life' – to wit, bread, cheese, and beer, with sundry instrument of navigation had been conveyed, by the aid of which and the rowing of willing arms they landed two days later on the French coast near St Malo.

The lieutenant of Forbin's ship had to be left behind owing to the fact that his extreme stoutness and his one arm prevented him from descending the wall by a blanket ladder. On the morrow he acted an extreme surprise, cursing his unfaithful companions for going off and leaving him in the lurch, though in truth he had sat up late the night before, carrying on a conversation in three different voices in order to give his companions the better chance of escape.

'Well do I see now,' he concluded 'why that rascal Bart got new shoes the day before yesterday, when he had all the long way into Scotland to walk.'

An exceedingly simple English officer was completely deceived by this ingenious reasoning, and despatched mounted men along the North road – leaving the seas clear for the navigation of the two adventurers and their friend the Flemish doctor.

All the same, it was an ill day for the English when they so poorly guarded their prisoner in Plymouth. For many years Jean Bart continued to lift their ships literally by scores. He carried back to Dunkirk prizes worth half a million francs at a time. Then, says the record, he would 'come ashore, drink a little *eau-de-vie*, smoke a pipe, and so to sea again!'

Presently, however, during a lull, he was sent for to Court. The King wished to see with his own eyes the famous Corsair. Forbin went with him, and as he tells us himself (he always sneers a little at Jean in his well-bred, superior way), the courtiers ran laughing to look at them, crying out to each other as they ran; 'Let us go see the Chevalier Forbin leading his bear!'

But the King was not long in reminding the jesters that not one of them had rendered him such service as this sea-bear from the Northern Dunes.

Jean stayed some time at the court, where his rough ways caused great merriment. One morning, having to wait in the King's antechamber till the King rose, Jean found the time long. So, like an honest mariner, he drew his short black pipe out of his pocket, loaded, and lit up. The gentlemen of the bedchamber expostulated, and finally bade him stop, threatening to tell the King.

'Sirs,' said Jean, puffing away, 'I learned this habit in the King's service. It is as necessary to me as your breakfast to you. The King is too just to make me do without it.'

Off ran a messenger to tell Louis of the enormity that was happening in his sacred antechamber. The King was in a good humour. He laughed and said 'I bet that will be Jean Bart. Let him smoke if he wants to.' And so when he last met the sailor, all his reproof was only this: 'Jean Bart, listen. You are the only man who is allowed to smoke at my Court.'

Another day the King said to him, after looking at his firm countenance and sturdy frame: 'Jean, I would that I had ten thousand men such as you.'

'I believe you!' quoth Jean, nodding grimly.

At which when the courtiers (doubtless behind Jean's back) were laughing, the King said 'He is quite right. He speaks like a man who knows his value. He has done great things for me, and he means to do

more. I wish any one of you were like him.'

Once again, the King had given Jean an order on his treasurer for a thousand 'shields' – that is to say two hundred pounds. The note was addressed to a certain number in the Street of the Grand – Chantiers, and Jean marched directly there, tramped up the stairs, paper in hand. He opened a door and found himself in a great dining-room where many guests were assembled.

'Which of you,' he cried, 'is called Peter Gruin?'

'I am Monsieur Gruin,' said one of the diners without rising.

'Read this paper,' quoth Jean Bart.

Treasurer Gruin took the paper, cast his eyes upon it, held it out over his shoulder and let it fall again negligently behind him.

'You can come back in two days' time!' he said and fell to his plate.

Quicker than a wink, Jean the Corsair had his sabre 'at the clear,' and in immediate proximity to the ribs of the indolent treasurer.

'Pick that paper up and pay it immediately!'

Monsieur Gruin, with one eye on the glint of the steel, meekly gathered up the order and began from a neighbouring drawer to count out a thousand dollars in silver.

'It is in gold that I must have it,' cried Jean. 'Oddslife, man! Do you take me for a mule?'

When in the midst of the busy, fightful years that followed, Jean Bart's son, Cornil, appeared at Court to report the taking of a great Dutch convoy of wheat (a success which at the time almost saved the starving armies of France from famine), it was with many misgivings that Cornil presented himself in his rough sea-costume before the King. Louis asked the youth if he had taken part in the boarding.

'Sire,' said the boy, 'I mounted with my father.'

'You are very young,' said the King; 'but after all, it is no ways astonishing that a son of Jean Bart should be brave.'

As the lad was leaving his presence, his sea-boot slipped on the polished *parquet* of the great *salon*. Seeing him fall, the King cried out and made an involuntary movement to save him.

'One may very well see,' said he, laughing, 'that the Messieurs Bart are better sailors than courtiers.'

There was indeed, an old and longstanding feud between Jean and the favourites of Louis. Once the King had asked him how it was that he had broken his way through the fleet of the Hollanders, who were in stronger force.

'It happened just like that!' he said.

Jean Bart loved his art for his arts' sake. Corsairs are popularly supposed to amass wealth, to feather their nests with prize money, to scatter in riot their easily gotten gains. But, according to the official state of his affairs put by the commission of inquiry before the King, late in life honest Jean possessed nothing but a house and a farm, which had both come down to him as the dowers of his first and second wives. When ashore, he was only a worthy, quiet burgess of his native town – a pipe on the quay, a *tasse* of brandy at the *café*, and a quiet turn at the fishing to get a sniff of the brine, amply sufficing him in the way of pleasure.

As a last task he was appointed by the King to lead the expedition which was to set James II once more on the throne of his fathers. But even Jean Bart could not put spirit and resolution into the futile heart of the last of the Stuart kings. Shortly afterwards, the war of the Spanish Succession broke out, and Jean, seeing once more his favourite career opening before him, this time with the ships of all nations for his legitimate prey, had begun fitting out his redoubtable Volunteer Squadron. But alas! A chill caught in the

keen Channel airs which blew through the open sheds, sent him home to die quietly after all his hundred battles. His best claim to immortality is that his swift little ships forestalled our modern cruisers, and that, born a fisherman, he died by right and title the First Light Horseman of the Seas.

PICTURES FROM THE ORIGINAL

For pictures from the original click [HERE](#)

This ebook has been republished by Ayton Publishing Limited in 2017.

For more work by and about S.R.Crockett why not visit our website

www.aytonpublishing.co.uk

or the S.R.Crockett Catalogue in the www.unco.scot bookstore.

To join the Galloway Raiders please go to www.gallowayraiders.co.uk