

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTAIN BOWERS GIVES FRED RANSOM A VACANT BERTH IN THE CABIN—FRED RANSOM PERFORMS HIS DUTIES ABOARD OF THE SCHOONER—THE CAPTAIN GIVES HIM LEAVE TO GO ASHORE—THE QUAYS, FISH-MARKET, HAVANA LOTTERY, VOLANTES, THE PASEO, TOMB OF COLUMBUS, CAPTAIN-GENERAL OF CUBA.



HE object of the wrecker's visit to Havana was to procure a supply of sugar for some of the merchants of Key West. Happening to be at Key West, for the purpose of undergoing repairs, which were just finished when the merchants desired to replenish their stocks of sugar, the vessel was chartered for the voyage to Havana. Her business in Havana was not to detain her more than two or three days, at the end of which time she could in a few hours run over to Key West, which is about eighty-two miles distant.

Captain Bowers turned out to be as good-natured as his appearance indicated. As Captain Edson had predicted, I was certainly in

luck ; for, besides having a most desirable commander, I was accommodated aboard the vessel, as I believe cabin-boy never was before. There was no bunk forward to spare, and this fact gave the captain a plausible excuse for granting me permission to occupy one of the vacant berths in the cabin. How Captain Bowers came to be guilty of this queer proceeding will be best explained by the following conversation which ensued between us, immediately after I had gathered up the fugitive coin which had dispersed in as many directions as there were pieces.

“Fred,” said the captain, “my friend, Captain Edson, has told me all about your situation, and appealed to me to do the best I can for you. I intend to do that, if you deserve it. Whether you do, or not, is yet to be tested. Meantime I’ll take it for granted, and commence by doing the best I can for you. You’ve been carefully brought up, and would n’t find it very pleasant to stay forward with the crew, who are good fellows enough, but rather rough, and not exactly the kind of people you’ve been used to living with. So, although I never heard of a cabin-boy’s shipping in the cabin, as it happens my friend takes an interest in you, and I’m disposed to do the same, now I know your story, why you can have a berth in the cabin, and live

aboard the schooner until you can get word from your father. You'll have to serve the cabin, just like any other cabin-boy, and lend a hand anywhere you're needed; but I think you're pretty well off for a chap who has got into such a scrape."

"Indeed, I am, captain," I replied, "and I am very much obliged to you for your kindness to me, and I'll do the best I can to deserve it." (This promise, let me here say, I religiously observed.)

"Well, see that you do, and it'll be the best thanks that you can give me," rejoined the captain. Now I've got through with what I had to say, and I'm going ashore on business. What are you going to do with yourself?

I answered that I supposed I would begin my duties immediately.

"All right," said the captain, "I'm glad to see that you realize your position. But after you get things set to rights, suppose you go ashore, and buy some clothes, for Captain Edson told me you had n't a stitch except what you've got on your back. Hold! I guess you'd better wait for that, until we arrive at Key West. This is an awfully dear place, and your money would n't go very far. However, if you're inclined, you can go ashore to-morrow, and see the sights. I guess it will take you pretty much all day to-day, to get things fixed about the cabin, as it has n't been cleared up this long time."

A few minutes afterwards, the captain was off for shore, and I spent the whole day in setting things to rights, cleaning out the lockers, throwing accumulated rubbish overboard, and washing and putting away that portion of the cabin crockery, which, not having been in daily use, was as dusty as it ever could have been when lying in the china shop. These operations, with sweeping, scrubbing paint, rehangings the curtains of the cabin windows and berths, occupied me during the whole day, and I had barely finished by evening, when the captain returned, and congratulated me upon the favorable change effected by my exertions.

The next morning, after I had served the captain's breakfast, there was nothing for me to do, so, as he was again going ashore to spend the day, he took me in his gig, and landed me, with full permission to devote my time to seeing Havana. Telling me that if I would return to the same place at six o'clock in the evening, he would then be going off to the vessel, he bade me good-morning, and left me standing on the quay.

The quay was not formed of a number of projecting wharves or piers, but consisted of a long line of wharf, following the outline of the shore of the harbor. Although small, it presented the same general appearance as the levees

which, some years afterwards, I saw on the Mississippi, at New Orleans. This quay, at the time of which I speak, was planked wholly, or in great part, with huge timbers of mahogany. These have been since replaced by a less valuable wood; but you must not suppose that mahogany is as dear a wood in Cuba as it is in the United States, for it grows in the West Indies.

Besides the vessels lying at anchor in the harbor, among which were some Spanish men-of-war, numerous small craft lay alongside of the quay. These, from the limited amount of accommodations afforded by a single wharf-line, were chiefly moored "end-on" to the quay. Numerous little boats, with awnings over the stern, lay along shore, in quite a tier, awaiting their chance of a fare. Others, which had been so fortunate as to find one, plied busily about the harbor.

I saw the fish-market of Havana, which is one of the finest in the world. The sale of fish was a monopoly enjoyed by an individual who had matters pretty much his own way, as far as the fishermen were concerned; for he paid a stated price for fish of five pounds in weight, but if they were less than five pounds, he exacted four or five fish, and paid no more. Nevertheless, owing to the abundance of fish in those

waters, catching them proved profitable enough to induce men to supply the market.

In so warm a climate, fishing is a somewhat precarious business; for a cargo is sometimes lost when a vessel is becalmed for many hours. That, however, is not of frequent occurrence. The cause of the loss of the fish, at such a time, is that they then lack a fresh supply of water. When the fishing-smacks roll and plunge in a seaway, the water is constantly changing. These vessels are built with a large compartment, which is called the well. The well is supplied with water, by means of holes bored through the vessel's bottom. When such a vessel is under way, or even when she is rocking at anchor, the water in the well is constantly changing; but when there is no motion, the supply ceases, and the fish sicken and die. Fish are extremely delicate in their nature, and the fishermen are obliged to watch and remove any which may show symptoms of being sick; otherwise, the whole cargo may become infected. The operation of removal is generally performed by boys, who dive into the well.

Some of the things which I have mentioned, and others which I still have to tell, I did not learn on shore, but gathered from Captain Bowers, or later experience of my own.

After I had rambled about the quay for some

time, and seen every thing there, I concluded to go into the city.

The first place that I visited was the tomb of Columbus, in the cathedral. The city seemed to me a most curious place. The houses are often painted blue or yellow; and they have bars at the windows, so that the first street into which I rambled, reminded me for all the world of a menagerie. The houses generally had large *portes-cochère*, which are carriage ways passing through the face of a building. The houses are constructed around the sides of quadrangles, thus enclosing a court-yard in the centre. This is the usual mode of building in hot climates; for it ensures coolness, especially in the court-yards, which are often planted as gardens, and embellished with fountains.

By this time, the sun had got pretty high, and I stopped under the shade of a massive *porte-cochère*, and looked out upon the busy streets. The pavements are of stone, and so narrow, that it is in vain for pedestrians to attempt to confine their steps to those walks. Had they existed in Europe at a period when men were apt to take the wall and make it a point of honor not to budge an inch, the adult male population would have been exterminated.

I had read Don Quixote, and some of the

sights that I saw, reminded me very much of the scenes described in the adventures of that renowned knight. I saw mules carrying water in casks suspended at their sides. Others carried loads of green fodder, which covered them so completely, that nothing was visible except their tiny hoofs stepping daintily along. Others, again, bore panniers of oranges. I stopped the owner of one of these, and bought some of his fruit. I could not speak Spanish, but I held out ten cents that the captain had given me as part of the change for one of my gold pieces, and made a sign towards the oranges. I have since found that money is a language which is universally understood and which, more than any other, appeals to the human heart. I expected to get only a couple of oranges, but I received ten and had not pockets enough in which to stow them. So I disposed of seven about my person, deposited two on the ground of my shady nook, and commenced operations on another. Many as I received, I suppose that I must have paid the usual penalty of a foreigner—that of being cheated.

I sucked away very complacently at my oranges, and, at the same time, continued to take in all that was going on in the street. The volantes, or carriages, are very peculiar. They are like great gigs. They have no

springs, but the absence of springs is compensated for by the position of the body of the vehicle, which, being placed forward of the axle-tree, and resting on the shafts, receives the benefit of their elasticity. These volantes are generally drawn by one horse, bestridden by a negro in top-boots. They hold two persons comfortably, but they are often occupied by three. Private volantes sometimes have an extra horse attached by traces, which meet at a pintle that is inserted in an eye placed on the outside of one of the shafts. Even with two persons,—what with the big gig-top and the people inside of it, and the negro on the horse,—the horse seems to be the smallest part of the turnout. He is constantly reminded of his duty by lashings, which his driver freely bestows. In truth, I never saw horses and mules so unmercifully treated as they are in Havana. Of course it is not among the horses belonging to private carriages that this maltreatment occurs.

Seeing so many of these vehicles pass, I came at last to examine one which stood in the corner, just in the rear of my sheltering *portecochère*. It was a very elaborate one, and seemed to be very much out of place; for it was carelessly backed up on a pile of rubbish, and the harness was thrown over the dasher,

and trailed in the dust. I afterwards ascertained that these circumstances are not at all unusual in Havana, where, even in handsome establishments, there is generally manifest a thorough absence of what we call "keeping." I afterwards learned from Captain Bowers, that many volantes were made in the United States, expressly for the Havana market. I confess that on hearing this, my interest in them was considerably lessened. People are so constituted, that remoteness strangely affects the imagination. In a foreign land, they gaze with deep interest at objects on which, at home, they might perhaps bestow a passing glance. I recollect that once when, years after the adventures that I am now recounting, I visited Table Rock, in South Carolina, I saw an old woman who lived at the foot of it, and marvelled in my presence why people came so far to clamber to its giddy height. From girlhood she had lived there, but never once thought of setting foot to its ascent.

It was dreadfully hot by the time that I left the shade of the *porte-cochère*, having determined to see more of the city, as I had only a few hours left, and we were to sail on the following day. I wandered about, stopping every now and then to take shelter in some

nook, and recruit my energies by partaking of another orange.

I was so lucky as to come across the drawing of the famous Havana lottery. This is an institution carried on by the Government, and as fairly conducted as it is possible to be; but, like all lotteries, it does not benefit the buyers of tickets as much as it does the proprietors of the concern. Individuals occasionally draw large sums, but dearly do they pay for their success, by imbibing the spirit of gambling, which generally leads them to risk and lose all and more than all that they have gained.

The monthly drawing of the lottery was conducted with great ceremony. It is the event upon which the hopes of thousands are centred, and there is always a large crowd in attendance. All the saints in the calendar are dinned with applications for a lucky number. The amount of injury effected by this lottery is incalculable. The gambling it begets and encourages, the petty thefts suggested by a desire to buy tickets, the misdirection of thought and energy, in the hope of some lucky stroke, are all such evils as no good Government would visit upon its people. And the Government of Spain is not good. It is unscrupulous. If it can contribute to its coffers, what matters a little vice among its subjects!

As evening approached, I followed the current of people, which seemed to be tending in a certain direction from the quarter of the city in which I then happened to find myself, and I came to the Paseo, or drive, upon which there was a great concourse of carriages and pedestrians, and a fine military band playing. Here is the palace of the Governor of Cuba, who is called the Captain-General. His is a distinguished post, with large emoluments in salary and perquisites of office. In fact, the position is that of viceroy, and it is always held by Spain's most powerful nobleman.

This drive, promenade, and music are the every-day amusements of the Habanese. I did not remain very long to enjoy the display, for I observed that the sun was going down rapidly. I took my departure, and hurried back to the quay, following the streets which I imagined would lead me to the spot at which I had landed in the morning. I did not hit it exactly, but after a little search, I discovered it, and seated myself on a pile of boxes to await the captain's arrival. In a few minutes he appeared, and made a signal to the schooner to send the boat ashore. While the boat was pulling in, the captain inquired kindly of me how I had managed to worry through my long

day ashore. I gave him a brief sketch of my doings, at which he laughed, and said,

“Who but a boy could have been contented to wander, for pleasure, about the streets of a city, so hot that the chief occupation of the inhabitants is to try to keep cool. And where did you get dinner, pray?”

I replied that I had bought so many oranges for ten cents, that I could not have eaten any thing more, if I had tried. At this he laughed again. In a few minutes the boat reached the quay. The captain motioned me to get aboard. He jumped in after me, and we shoved off for the schooner.