

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRED RANSOM GIVES SOME EXTRACTS FROM HIS JOURNAL, WHICH RECORDS SOME CURIOUS THINGS THAT HE SAW AND SOMETHING OF WHAT HE DID AND THE NEWS THAT HE RECEIVED.



EVER since I had left Key West, I had kept a journal in which I jotted down the incidents of the day. If there was nothing except the regular routine of duty, I wrote it down in a short, business-like way; but if any thing of particular interest occurred, either aboard or ashore, I wrote it out at my leisure, feeling that the day might come when it might prove of interest to me or to others.

On the 4th of December, my journal simply says:

"Wind N. N. W. Temperature moderate, atmosphere clear.

"Got under way at daylight; sighted the

wreckers in each direction. Came to anchor in our usual berth. Afternoon very cool for Florida."

The record of some days about the same period, so vividly recalls my thoughts and actions, that I prefer to quote from it for a while, rather than to attempt to change its frankly-written expressions.

"DECEMBER 6TH.

"The wind has been all around the compass to-day. We had hardly reached our usual turning-point at the northward, when the wind came out ahead, and that made it fair down the Reef; and we had hardly sighted the wrecker there, when the wind hauled sufficiently for us to lay our course back to the anchorage.

"At the anchorage, the water was remarkably clear to-day. In five fathoms of water, I could see every little shell on the bottom. I saw the most curious thing there. The men call it a sea-cat (there is also a fish of that name), and it did look like a cat. It was about ten or fifteen fathoms astern of the schooner. It looked like a tortoise-shell cat coiled up, for it had yellow stripes. I asked permission to take the dingy and get it, and the captain said I might, and Ruggles went along and helped me to grapple it with the killick."

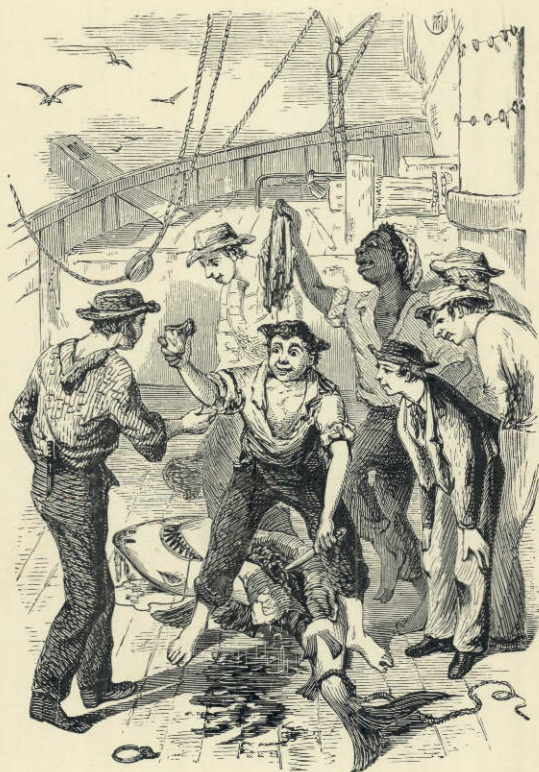
"We took it aboard the schooner. The nearer

we went up to it, the less it looked like a cat; but, at a certain distance, it was the image. It was nothing, either, but a sort of a sack of a substance about the the color of dirty flannel, and marked with tawny stripes and spots; and it was these marks that shaded the thing off so well that it looked like a cat. There were the eyes and nose and legs and tail. We cut it open, and it moved up and down as if it was breathing (but of course it was not breathing, for there were no lungs to breathe with), and every thing that it had inside of it was a thick concern like an entrail, and that was full of coral sand."

" DECEMBER 7TH.

"The captain keeps a fish-car, fastened by a line to the stern of the schooner. He generally has lots of groupers (that is the most common fish about here, and they make first-rate chowder), and they attract sharks to the vessel. I made up my mind to try to catch a shark, so I took three cod-fish hooks, and put their shafts together, and barbs pointing out. A shark took hold right away, and carried the hooks off as if they had been sugar-plums. The captain had given me permission to fish from the stern of the schooner, and, as he was in the cabin, he heard me halloo to Hannibal that I had lost my hooks, so he walked two or

three steps up the companion-way and handed me a big hook, which he called a shark-hook. It was about nine inches long, and had a short chain and swivel fastened to the end of the shaft. The captain says there must be a chain, because a shark will bite off any ordinary line, and there must be a swivel, even if there is a chain, because a shark will turn around so fast in the water that it will break or injure the line by twisting it, and with the swivel on the chain, it may turn as much as it pleases, it cannot twist the line. Hannibal baited the hook with a whole grouper, and I jerked the line as hard as I could. The shark did not pull heavily at first, and I began to think that I was going to haul it on deck all by myself; but I had scarcely got its nose out of the water, before it gave a dash, and whizzed out the line so as to burn my hands. I managed to stop the line with my foot, and give it a turn around a cleat, and then I called for the men, but the captain halloed to me not to let them haul the fish on the quarter-deck; so I took hold with three men, and we led the line outside of the main-shrouds, and then hauled the fish along-side of the schooner. One of the men passed a running bowline, or slipknot, over the slim part



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of the tail, just in front of the flukes, and the shark was soon hauled on deck.

"The men would cut it open (they always want to do that the first thing), to see what was in it. It seemed to me that we found almost every thing that had been thrown overboard for the last day or two. Hannibal found two old dishcloths that he had thrown away this morning, and there were Bill Ruggles's rusty old tin coffee-cup that had been tossed overboard, and a pair of tarry overalls that had belonged to Linden.

"The stories that I used to read, that the position of a shark's mouth obliged it to turn over on its back to seize its prey, are all nonsense. I recollect one that describes this position as favorable for stabbing the animal. A shark's mouth is a big, ugly slit, some distance from the animal's snout, but the shark, in seizing its prey, does not always stop, and it *never* turns over on its back. If it swims from a depth to seize its prey, it rises perpendicularly, like any other fish. If it and its prey are at the same depth, it darts horizontally, and, in passing, turns like lightning on one side, and uses its jaws. It is not a quick fish. Sailors say that it cannot catch a bowline towing in the water. But that is an exaggeration. It is

only a slow fish when compared with the quickest."

"DECEMBER 8TH.

"The captain got Ruggles to row him off in the dingy. He told me to come along, as he was going to fish, and I might keep him supplied with conch cut up for bait. We fished just abreast of the inlet, near the anchorage, and caught eleven groupers, two barracudas, and some grunts. After we got through fishing, the captain told Ruggles to row slowly along the edge of the mangroves in the inlet, so as to keep in the shade of the trees. Here I found some shells called mickleemocks.* I had often seen them as ornaments in parlors, on side-boards, or on mantel-pieces. It is a sort of turtle-shaped shell with an even slit in it on the under side. The queerest part of finding them is, that I found them on trees (some of the boys at home would not believe that). They were stuck fast to the mangrove roots and boughs that were under the water, and the animals in the shells had such a power of suction, that you had to pull them pretty hard to get them off. The captain told me not to take more than two or three, because they would make so much smell

* Mickleemock is the sound of the word. It is a local name, is probably of Indian origin, and without fixed orthography.

on the schooner before I could get the shells perfectly sweet. A couple of days ago, he told the men that, if they wanted to clean any more sponges, they must do it on shore, as he would not have such a smell on the schooner. The sponges, when drying, do smell awfully, that is a fact.

“We went off to the schooner about five o'clock, and I gave my shells to Hannibal to put in hot water, so as to kill the animals. To-morrow I will gouge them out as well as I can, and let the rest dry out, and take the shells home to—I was going to say,—to my father, but I do not know yet whether he will ever accept any thing from me. I wish that a letter from him would come. This suspense sometimes makes me very unhappy. 10 P. M. by the cabin-clock. It is so late that I must turn in.”

“DECEMBER 9TH.

“This afternoon a sail was lowered in the water, so as to make a ‘belly,’ as the men call it, and all hands went in bathing. The captain says that the men shall not go in swimming off the vessel, on account of the sharks about. The other afternoon I was looking overboard, thinking there were no sharks about, and wishing I could strip off and take a plunge, and I saw a thing, like a black shadow,

coming from under the vessel, and it was a big shark. I guess I thought the captain was right after that. We often talk of the poor Norwegian."

"DECEMBER 10TH.

"Bill Ruggles taught me to box the compass to-day. It seems hard at first, but it is very easy when you come to look into it. The mariner's compass is divided into thirty-two points. It is divided into quarters by the four cardinal points, north, south, east, and west. The quarters are divided into eighths, the eighths into sixteenths, and the sixteenths into thirty-secondths.

"To recite the points in order, commencing at the first one west of north, is called boxing the compass backwards.

"Seamen speak of half points. For instance: midway between south, and south by east, the place is called south by east, half south."

"DECEMBER 11TH.

"This afternoon the captain had a new suit of sails bent on the masts of one of the quarter-boats; and to try them, he took me and a full crew on a sail up the Reef, so as to have plenty of live ballast and crowd sail on, and to row back in case of necessity. The wind died away almost as soon as we left the schooner, but the captain kept on up the Reef-Channel, until

nearly dark. Before dark, it was almost calm for a couple of hours, and the water was as smooth as glass. It was quite dark before the men had rowed half-way back to the schooner. The water is more luminous to-night than I ever saw it. When the oar-blades dipped into it, it looked as if a scum had been broken through, and showed below a lake of molten gold. On each side of the boat, a wing of flame spread out from the bow, and in her wake, she had a long fiery tail like a comet's. The captain calls this water phosphorescent, and says that it is caused by immense numbers of little animals that give out light.

"As we were rowing back, I asked the captain whether he did not think it was time for the arrival of our mail from Key West, and he said that he did. He said that he thought that if any letter was coming for me, it must have reached Key West, and the next mail from there would bring it.

"Until the captain said this, it had never struck me that I might not receive some letter, good or bad. No letter would be the worst thing of all."

"DECEMBER 12TH.

"This is a black day in my calendar. The captain told me that he wished me to prepare a

spare berth in the cabin, as he expected his son within a few days. He said that he could not tell within a few days, but, that when last in Key West, he had told his son that he might come up the Reef at the first opportunity that offered about the middle of December.

"I do not know what kind of a fellow the captain's son will turn out to be. If I was only an officer of the vessel, or one of the crew! If the captain's son is a nice fellow, and I belonged in the cabin, it would be splendid. It won't be pleasant to be bossed by a boy no older than I am. I wonder whether it would offend the captain to ask him to let me go forward? I am neither fish, flesh, nor fowl here."

"DECEMBER 13TH.

"No signs of the captain's son yet. The berth is ready for him. The captain has mentioned to me that his son alternately goes to school, and sails aboard of the *Flying Cloud*, as he is to follow wrecking for a livelihood. He is to be aboard during all this winter."

"DECEMBER 16TH.

"The captain's son not arrived yet, and there is no mail yet. The captain's son's name is George,—George Bowers. I don't know whether that sounds as if he was a good fellow or not."

“DECEMBER 18TH.

“Shall I never get a letter? The captain says that a mail must be coming along pretty soon. Why don't that fellow George come, if he is coming?”

“DECEMBER 19TH.

“Captain's son and my letter have both come together. Hurrah! I am the luckiest fellow in the world!”