

CHAPTER XXIV.

GEORGE BOWERS AND THE LONG-EXPECTED NEWS FROM HOME—THE TIDE IN THE AFFAIRS OF FRED RANSOM IS AT THE FLOOD, WHICH, SHAKESPEARE SAYS, "LEADS ON TO FORTUNE."



MY journal contains scarcely any thing on the 19th of December, because so much happened, and I was so happy, that I could write nothing save an expression of delight.

We were lying at our anchorage, when, about four o'clock in the afternoon, a schooner hove in sight. I felt sure that on board were the captain's son and my long-expected letter. My heart failed me at the thought of what trouble the former, and what sorrow the latter might bring. In half an hour, the captain discovered that some one was making signals from the deck of the schooner. He closed his telescope, and calling me to him, said:

"I feel sure that George is aboard. I make out the schooner to be the *Kate Ramsey*, which was to leave Key West about this time, and aboard of her I see some one waving a handkerchief."

In half an hour more, the *Kate Ramsey* was flying by us, with the captain's son standing on the quarter-deck, shouting, and waving his handkerchief. She rounded to, let go her anchor, and lowered a boat. George Bowers descended into it with his seaman's chest. In a minute he was clambering up the side of the *Flying Cloud*, and shaking hands with his father, who led him away to the cabin. I was left on deck in ignorance as to whether there was any mail. I asked one of the seamen who was passing young Bowers' chest out of the boat, whether he knew if there was a mail from Key West. He said that he believed there was. Just at that moment, the captain put his head above the companion-way and said,

"Fred, tell the men to fetch that chest aft."

The chest was taken aft, and down the companion-way, and my anxiety continued for a brief space longer, when I heard Captain Bowers call,

"Here's a letter for you, Fred."

I ran eagerly aft, the captain handed me a letter, and then retired into the cabin. I was alone

on the quarter-deck. With an irresolute feeling, I turned the letter over once or twice, fearing to examine its contents. Then I desperately broke the seal, and took out a note directed to Captain Bowers. Thrusting that into my pocket, I commenced to read my letter, the first words of which thrilled me with joy. This is it.

“NEW YORK, November 18th.

“MY DEAR FRED:—

“However good a son you may be (and I believe you to be a good son), you cannot comprehend a father’s love until you have been a father. Had I to forgive even disobedience, I would cheerfully do so, if you showed contrition. But you have not thus offended me, and I have not that to forgive. I have found you ever truthful, how could you then suppose that I might disbelieve your story? I thank Heaven that I can truly say, I do not doubt your word. Grief I have experienced, for when it was ascertained that you were missing and had probably sailed on the *Cygnets*, I thought that, in an unguarded moment, you had been betrayed into committing an act of disobedience; but when I received your letter, my son, it completely reassured me, and brought such joy to my heart as none but a parent can know.

“ You have been in fault, in not submitting to my judgment, and have had your punishment in the sorrow which you entailed upon yourself, and which I accept as full amends for your fault.

“ If I knew exactly how you were situated, and what were your feelings, I could speak definitely. If I thought that you were radically cured of the desire to pursue an adventurous career, I should say, at once, Come home. Or, if I knew that you were suffering hardship, even if I thought you still imbued with the nonsensical spirit that possessed you, I would say, at once, Come home. But I do not know how you are situated, or what your sentiments are, and, therefore, I must trust to that honor which I have said that I believed you to possess, and say to you this : If you are not suffering hardship, or if you can not conscientiously state that you believe yourself to be cured of your disposition towards adventure, do not return at present, but remain, in order that reality may blunt the keen edge of imagination.

“ I enclose a letter to Captain Bowers, thanking him for his kindness in taking you on his vessel, and requesting that if he does not desire to retain you longer, he will get you on board of some vessel on the Reef. As lads of your age may not be given any thing except their

board, I have told Captain Bowers that any owners in Key West may draw upon me, and I will be grateful to him if he will manage so that, wherever you are, you shall receive ten dollars a month. Good-bye, my son, and believe me that you have never forfeited my confidence or love.

Your affectionate father,

DAVID RANSOM."

While reading these lines, they appeared to become more and more blurred, as my eyes became suffused with tears, and when I had finished the last word, I could see nothing but a blank sheet of paper. Then welled up in my heart a thousand thoughts of mingled pleasure and pain. Memory poured its floods upon me, and, disembodied, I crossed my father's threshold, once more listened to his and to my dead mother's voice and counsel; and then, at last, came a soothing sense of relief, and high above all my thoughts, sat enthroned the resolution that the future should prove me not unworthy of their patient love. I had passed through one of those crises which mould the conduct of a life-time. I wiped away my tears, calmly folded my letter, and, after waiting for a few minutes, that all traces of agitation might disappear, I went down into the cabin, handed the captain the letter that had been enclosed

in mine, and, with my usual deportment, withdrew.

While in the cabin, I could not avoid seeing George, who was examining me with boyish freedom. Despite the feeling I had had towards him, because I feared that his presence might materially affect my situation, I could not now help being prepossessed with the appearance of the fellow. He had a strong likeness to his father; the same good-natured face, the same florid complexion. I took him to be about a year younger than I was, and I felt sure that he was, mentally, rather younger than his actual years. He had a towy head of short curly hair, that looked like the skin of a yellow poodle. He had blue, roguish-looking eyes, which seemed to indicate that the owner had a good deal of fun in his composition. All this I saw at a glance, and left the cabin, saying to myself, "He is n't such a bad-looking fellow after all." But I thought to myself, an instant afterwards, that it probably made no difference to me; for my father had himself suggested to Captain Bowers the idea of my discharge, and, under present circumstances, and as the captain must feel that he had done his duty towards me, he would very likely avail himself of the opening that my father had afforded.

The captain called me, and I returned to the

cabin. He sat at the table holding my father's letter in his hand, and beside him was George, leaning both elbows on the table, and having an expression of great interest in his face.

"Sit down, Fred," said the captain.

At this unusual request, I sat down on the nearest chair. Although I had always had a berth in the cabin, my use of the cabin had never extended beyond occupying it during the evening and night.

"Your father's letter to me," said the captain, addressing me, "apprises me of what is very gratifying to me to learn—that I have not been harboring a scamp. I did what I thought to be my duty in taking you aboard. You yourself must know that your story was very unlikely, but I gave you the benefit of the doubt. I did all that I thought was warranted by circumstances. Now, circumstances have changed. I *know* you to be unfortunate, instead of culpable, for your father tells me that he has implicit faith in your word. Of course, you can't any longer be a cabin-boy aboard of this vessel (how sadly that made me feel); you are free to go by the first opportunity (I did not want to go now), and I will say in your praise, that I think, considering the trying position in which, for a boy of your bringing up, you have been placed, that you

have shown remarkably good sense. Your father tells me that he has given you permission to come home, if you can honestly say that you are suffering hardship, or that you are completely cured of your craving for adventure."

"I cannot go then, captain, for I cannot honestly say either," I replied. "When must I leave the vessel, captain?"

"You are not *obliged* to leave it at all," replied the captain. "You do not intend to go home, then?"

"No, sir, I cannot," I answered.

"Then I myself have an offer to make you," said the captain. "George and I were talking over it before you came down, but I did not think it right to make it to you before, for fear of influencing your decision about returning. What would you say to remaining with me?"

"I would not ask any thing better," exclaimed I, wondering how I could stay aboard of the *Flying Cloud*, as the captain had said that I could no longer be his cabin-boy, and he knew, as well as I did, that I was not fit to be one of the crew.

"This is my offer," continued the captain. "My son George, here, is to be with me all winter on the Reef. When he comes, he is obliged to lose schooling, in acquiring other

knowledge. You are farther advanced in your studies than he. How would you like to stay with us and study with George and help him along? Would you consider your services paid by your board?"

I involuntarily started up from my seat, half-extending my hand, and then withdrawing it, with the feeling that I had taken a liberty.

"Give me your hand, my boy," said the captain, perceiving my embarrassment. "You are no longer the cabin-boy, and you never have been, as far as my feelings were concerned."

"Give us your hand," said George, jumping up, and imitating his father's example. "Won't we have jolly times!"

No wonder that I wrote almost nothing in my journal that night.