

CHAPTER XX

In the favoring current off Cape St. Roque, Brazil--All at sea regarding the Spanish-American war--An exchange of signals with the battle-ship Oregon --Off Dreyfus's prison on Devil's Island--Reappearance to the Spray of the north star--The light on Trinidad--A charming introduction to Grenada--Talks to friendly auditors.

On May 10 there was a great change in the condition of the sea; there could be no doubt of my longitude now, if any had before existed in my mind. Strange and long-forgotten current ripples pattered against the sloop's sides in grateful music; the tune arrested the oar, and I sat quietly listening to it while the Spray kept on her course. By these current ripples I was assured that she was now off St. Roque and had struck the current which sweeps around that cape. The trade-winds, we old sailors say, produce this current, which, in its course from this point forward, is governed by the coastline of Brazil, Guiana, Venezuela, and, as some would say, by the Monroe Doctrine.

The trades had been blowing fresh for some time, and the current, now at its height, amounted to forty miles a day. This, added to the sloop's run by the log, made the handsome day's work of one hundred and eighty miles on several consecutive days, I saw nothing of the coast of Brazil, though I was not many leagues off and was always in the Brazil current.

I did not know that war with Spain had been declared, and that I might be liable, right there, to meet the enemy and be captured. Many had told me at Cape Town that, in their opinion, war was inevitable, and they said: "The Spaniard will get you! The Spaniard will get you!" To all this I could only say that, even so, he would not get much. Even in the fever-heat over the disaster to the Maine I did not think there would be war; but I am no politician. Indeed, I had hardly given the matter a serious thought when, on the 14th of May, just north of the equator, and near the longitude of the river Amazon, I saw first a mast, with the Stars and Stripes floating from it, rising astern as if poked up out of the sea, and then rapidly appearing on the horizon, like a citadel, the Oregon! As she came near I saw that the great ship was flying the signals "C B T," which read, "Are there any men-of-war about?" Right under these flags, and larger than the Spray's mainsail, so it appeared, was the yellowest Spanish flag I ever saw. It gave me nightmare some time after when I reflected on it in my dreams.

I did not make out the Oregon's signals till she passed ahead, where I could read them better, for she was two miles away, and I had no binoculars. When I had read her flags I hoisted the signal "No," for I had not seen any Spanish men-of-war; I had not been looking for any. My final signal, "Let us keep together for mutual protection," Captain Clark did not seem to regard as necessary. Perhaps my small flags were

not made out; anyhow, the Oregon steamed on with a rush, looking for Spanish men-of-war, as I learned afterward. The Oregon's great flag was dipped beautifully three times to the Spray's lowered flag as she passed on. Both had crossed the line only a few hours before. I pondered long that night over the probability of a war risk now coming upon the Spray after she had cleared all, or nearly all, the dangers of the sea, but finally a strong hope mastered my fears.

On the 17th of May, the Spray, coming out of a storm at daylight, made Devil's Island, two points on the lee bow, not far off. The wind was still blowing a stiff breeze on shore. I could clearly see the dark-gray buildings on the island as the sloop brought it abeam. No flag or sign of life was seen on the dreary place.

Later in the day a French bark on the port tack, making for Cayenne, hove in sight, close-hauled on the wind. She was falling to leeward fast, The Spray was also closed-hauled, and was lugging on sail to secure an offing on the starboard tack, a heavy swell in the night having thrown her too near the shore, and now I considered the matter of supplicating a change of wind. I had already enjoyed my share of favoring breezes over the great oceans, and I asked myself if it would be right to have the wind turned now all into my sails while the Frenchman was bound the other way. A head current, which he stemmed, together with a scant wind, was bad enough for him. And so I could only say, in my heart, "Lord, let matters stand as they are, but do not help the Frenchman any more just now, for what would suit him well would ruin me!"

I remembered that when a lad I heard a captain often say in meeting that in answer to a prayer of his own the wind changed from southeast to northwest, entirely to his satisfaction. He was a good man, but did this glorify the Architect--the Ruler of the winds and the waves? Moreover, it was not a trade-wind, as I remember it, that changed for him, but one of the variables which will change when you ask it, if you ask long enough. Again, this man's brother maybe was not bound the opposite way, well content with a fair wind himself, which made all the difference in the world. [Footnote: The Bishop of Melbourne (commend me to his teachings) refused to set aside a day of prayer for rain, recommending his people to husband water when the rainy season was on. In like manner, a navigator husbands the wind, keeping a weather-gage where practicable.]

On May 18, 1898, is written large in the Spray's log-book: "To-night, in latitude 7 degrees 13' N., for the first time in nearly three years I see the north star." The Spray on the day following logged one hundred and forty-seven miles. To this I add thirty-five miles for current sweeping her onward. On the 20th of May, about sunset, the island of Tobago, off the Orinoco, came into view, bearing west by north, distant twenty-two miles. The Spray was drawing rapidly toward her home destination. Later at night, while running free along the coast of Tobago, the wind still blowing fresh, I was startled by the sudden flash of breakers on the port bow and not far off. I luffed

instantly offshore, and then tacked, heading in for the island. Finding myself, shortly after, close in with the land, I tacked again offshore, but without much altering the bearings of the danger. Sail whichever way I would, it seemed clear that if the sloop weathered the rocks at all it would be a close shave, and I watched with anxiety, while beating against the current, always losing ground. So the matter stood hour after hour, while I watched the flashes of light thrown up as regularly as the beats of the long ocean swells, and always they seemed just a little nearer. It was evidently a coral reef,--of this I had not the slightest doubt,--and a bad reef at that. Worse still, there might be other reefs ahead forming a bight into which the current would sweep me, and where I should be hemmed in and finally wrecked. I had not sailed these waters since a lad, and lamented the day I had allowed on board the goat that ate my chart. I taxed my memory of sea lore, of wrecks on sunken reefs, and of pirates harbored among coral reefs where other ships might not come, but nothing that I could think of applied to the island of Tobago, save the one wreck of Robinson Crusoe's ship in the fiction, and that gave me little information about reefs. I remembered only that in Crusoe's case he kept his powder dry. "But there she booms again," I cried, "and how close the flash is now! Almost aboard was that last breaker! But you'll go by, Spray, old girl! 'T is abeam now! One surge more! and oh, one more like that will clear your ribs and keel!" And I slapped her on the transom, proud of her last noble effort to leap clear of the danger, when a wave greater than the rest threw her higher than before, and, behold, from the crest of it was revealed at once all there was of the reef. I fell back in a coil of rope, speechless and amazed, not distressed, but rejoiced. Aladdin's lamp! My fisherman's own lantern! It was the great revolving light on the island of Trinidad, thirty miles away, throwing flashes over the waves, which had deceived me! The orb of the light was now dipping on the horizon, and how glorious was the sight of it! But, dear Father Neptune, as I live, after a long life at sea, and much among corals, I would have made a solemn declaration to that reef! Through all the rest of the night I saw imaginary reefs, and not knowing what moment the sloop might fetch up on a real one, I tacked off and on till daylight, as nearly as possible in the same track, all for the want of a chart. I could have nailed the St. Helena goat's pelt to the deck.

My course was now for Grenada, to which I carried letters from Mauritius. About midnight of the 22d of May I arrived at the island, and cast anchor in the roads off the town of St. George, entering the inner harbor at daylight on the morning of the 23d, which made forty-two days' sailing from the Cape of Good Hope. It was a good run, and I doffed my cap again to the pilot of the Pinta.

Lady Bruce, in a note to the Spray at Port Louis, said Grenada was a lovely island, and she wished the sloop might call there on the voyage home. When the Spray arrived, I found that she had been fully expected. "How so?" I asked. "Oh, we heard that you were at Mauritius," they said, "and from Mauritius, after meeting Sir Charles Bruce, our old governor, we knew you would come to Grenada." This was

a charming introduction, and it brought me in contact with people worth knowing.

The *Spray* sailed from Grenada on the 28th of May, and coasted along under the lee of the Antilles, arriving at the island of Dominica on the 30th, where, for the want of knowing better, I cast anchor at the quarantine ground; for I was still without a chart of the islands, not having been able to get one even at Grenada. Here I not only met with further disappointment in the matter, but was threatened with a fine for the mistake I made in the anchorage. There were no ships either at the quarantine or at the commercial roads, and I could not see that it made much difference where I anchored. But a negro chap, a sort of deputy harbormaster, coming along, thought it did, and he ordered me to shift to the other anchorage, which, in truth, I had already investigated and did not like, because of the heavier roll there from the sea. And so instead of springing to the sails at once to shift, I said I would leave outright as soon as I could procure a chart, which I begged he would send and get for me. "But I say you mus' move befo' you gets anyt'ing't all," he insisted, and raising his voice so that all the people alongshore could hear him, he added, "An' jes now!" Then he flew into a towering passion when they on shore snickered to see the crew of the *Spray* sitting calmly by the bulwark instead of hoisting sail. "I tell you dis am quarantine" he shouted, very much louder than before. "That's all right, general," I replied; "I want to be quarantined anyhow." "That's right, boss," some one on the beach cried, "that's right; you get quarantined," while others shouted to the deputy to "make de white trash move 'long out o' dat." They were about equally divided on the island for and against me. The man who had made so much fuss over the matter gave it up when he found that I wished to be quarantined, and sent for an all-important half-white, who soon came alongside, starched from clue to earing. He stood in the boat as straight up and down as a fathom of pump-water--a marvel of importance. "Charts!" cried I, as soon as his shirt-collar appeared over the sloop's rail; "have you any charts?" "No, sah," he replied with much-stiffened dignity; "no, sah; cha'ts do'sn't grow on dis island." Not doubting the information, I tripped anchor immediately, as I had intended to do from the first, and made all sail for St. John, Antigua, where I arrived on the 1st of June, having sailed with great caution in midchannel all the way.

The *Spray*, always in good company, now fell in with the port officers' steam-launch at the harbor entrance, having on board Sir Francis Fleming, governor of the Leeward Islands, who, to the delight of "all hands," gave the officer in charge instructions to tow my ship into port. On the following day his Excellency and Lady Fleming, along with Captain Burr, R. N., paid me a visit. The court-house was tendered free to me at Antigua, as was done also at Grenada, and at each place a highly intelligent audience filled the hall to listen to a talk about the seas the *Spray* had crossed, and the countries she had visited.