

## CHAPTER XV.

JOIN THE "CYANE"—BAD NAVIGATION—HAVANA—THE LOPEZ EXPEDITION—KEY WEST—THE DRY TORTUGAS—PENSACOLA—COMMODORE J. T. NEWTON—GREYTOWN—THE NICARAGUA ROUTE—A TRIP UP THE SAN JUAN DEL NORTE—CASTILLO—JOIN A FLYING SQUADRON AT PORTSMOUTH, N. H.—EASTPORT—ST. JOHNS—THE BAY OF FUNDY—CAPTAIN GEO. N. HOLLINS—A SUNKEN ROCK—AN OLD TIME DUTCH COMMANDER—THE GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE—DETACHED FROM THE "CYANE"—THE "CYANE" BOMBARDS GREYTOWN—THE ISTHMUS OF DARIEN—STRAIN'S EXPEDITION—CAPTAIN PREVOST'S EXPERIENCE—THE DARIEN AND MOSQUITO INDIANS.

I REPORTED on board the *Cyane* in July, 1852, and did not much fancy going into the steerage again after having been sailing master of a ship for two years; but my rank did not entitle me to be detailed as such from the navy department, so I had to take my chance of an acting appointment as I had done in going to the coast of Africa. We went from Norfolk to New York for a draft of men to complete our crew, and in the Fall sailed for Havana. Our master was not by any means an expert in the art of navigating a ship, and in attempting to go through the Hole in the Wall came very near plumping us on Abaco Island; however we got to Havana without further mishap and after remaining there a few days sailed for Pensacola. Here we found orders to return to Havana. On this trip our master got entirely out of his reckoning; we made the land on the fourth day out, and at sunset hove to off what *he* said was Havana. We thought it very strange that the *light* could not be seen; but there is always much delicacy observed in such cases in the navy, and no one had a word to say. That night I had the mid watch, and at 12 o'clock relieved the master who told me the orders were *to keep the beach in sight*. The ship was under topsails, foresail and jib and

was sailing along the land with a light breeze, instead of being hove to with her head off shore as she should have been. Not liking the look of things I made the master write the orders on the log slate.

About 1 o'clock the lookout in the lee gangway reported a boat in sight, and stepping to leeward I saw a fishing boat at anchor. Knowing we must be pretty close to the land I wore ship close around the boat, and stood off shore. At 3 A. M. I tacked ship and stood in shore again for the purpose of putting the ship as near the position in which I took charge of her as possible. At 4 when the watch was called we were nearly as close to the land as at 12, and when my relief (who was a slow coach) came up we just had the beach in sight as directed. I told my relief that he had better tack ship at once, stand off shore for an hour, and by that time it would be light enough for him to see. He said he would do so. I went below and waited anxiously to hear the order "ready about," which at last came. As the ship went round I commenced to undress, but just as she came head to wind *she struck* and was soon hard and fast aground. All hands were soon on deck and the stream anchor was carried out astern. The ship did not make any water, and by 8 o'clock we had her afloat again without having had to start the water or throw anything overboard; but it was a narrow escape. We found upon inquiring of some fishermen who came off that we were near Bahia Honda, 45 miles west of Havana!

Captain Hollins was a very cool, prompt seaman, and handled his ship well on this occasion. I was much struck with his manner upon reaching the deck. He did not ask any unnecessary questions; he recognized the fact that the vessel was on shore and must be gotten off, and he proceeded to take steps to accomplish it. Indeed he never *did* call the master to account either for being so much out in his reckoning, or for not heaving the ship to with her head off shore as he had ordered him to do. I thought myself he should not have overlooked this latter point.



Upon our arrival at Havana our third lieutenant was invalided which promoted me to master, and a few days afterwards the *Fulton* came in with Vice President King on board, short of officers. Our former master was sent to her, and I became an acting lieutenant, and Passed Midshipman Van Zandt was made master.

Our stay at Havana was not marked by any incidents of importance. The relations between the United States and Spain were rather strained in consequence of the expedition of Lopez in 1850. In April of that year Lopez landed at Cardenas with about six hundred men, and after an obstinate engagement succeeded in taking the town. He was afterwards forced to fly, and with some others escaped to the United States. The Cubans treated the prisoners with unnecessary cruelty, not to say barbarity; and the feeling against Americans was very bitter at this time.

It will be remembered that Lopez made another attempt in the summer of 1857 with 480 men. On the 11th of August he landed on the northern coast of Cuba, where he left Colonel Crittenden and 100 men, and started to the interior expecting to be joined by the people. He was disappointed. His army was attacked and dispersed. Crittenden and his party were captured and shot. Lopez and six of his companions were also captured, and afterwards executed at Havana by the *garrote*. The recent attempts of the Cubans to attain their independence, and the shooting of Captain Fry and others need not be repeated here. These expeditions cannot be justified by any international laws or customs.

We gave a ball during our stay, but it was principally attended by Americans and English, and we saw but little of Cuban society in any of our subsequent visits. We managed to enjoy ourselves riding about the neighborhood in volantes, visiting the Tacon theatre and the café Dominica, the most charming café I have ever seen in any country.

From Havana we went to Key West where we spent two weeks very pleasantly. The citizens we found very kind and

hospitable and several balls were given us. The *Cyane* had now been several years in commission and was overrun by rats. The men were so much annoyed by them that they could find no comfort in their hammocks. Reinforcements joined them at every port in spite of all our precautions, and it had come to such a point that we had to take steps to get rid of them; so Captain Hollins decided to go to the Tortugas islands and "smoke" the ship. The Tortugas were surveyed in 1829 by the late Commodore Tattnall and the following year the Government commenced extensive fortifications on them. At the time of our visit the fort was not garrisoned, an ordnance sergeant being in charge.

We ran the ship alongside the coral reef and made her fast as though alongside a wharf. The air ports and hatches being carefully caulked in, charcoal fires were lit along the berth deck and in the holds, on platforms of sand. The carbonic acid gas formed, being heavier than the air, sinks and the rats are driven up from below. Tubs of water were placed along the deck, and as the gas makes the rats thirsty they are found around these tubs. The officers and the crew bivouacked on the island for two days and nights. We then returned to the ship and removed the hatches. I am afraid to tell how many dead rats we took from the berth deck and store rooms; but we were not troubled with them again during the cruise, nor did any seem to have died in the hold of the ship.

From the Tortugas we went to Pensacola where we found the frigate *Columbia*, bearing the flag of Commodore John T. Newton. Commodore Newton, though brave and intrepid, met with almost as much ill fortune at sea as Admiral Byron who was nicknamed by his sailors "Foul-weather Jack." He was a lieutenant on board the *Hornet* when she took the *Penguin* in 1815, and a sword presented to him for his gallantry on this occasion bore the inscription, "*Fortune favors the brave.*" It did not apply in his case, however. He was unfortunate enough to once lose an officer and boat's crew off Havana; he commanded the old steamer *Fulton* which blew



up at the New York Navy Yard by the explosion of her magazine; in 1852 he was ordered to command the steamer *Missouri*, a sister ship to the *Mississippi*; in her he went to Washington—the ship got ashore in the Potomac, and a lieutenant and some men were drowned in carrying out an anchor in the launch; finally the *Missouri* was burned at Gibraltar. The commodore was a remarkably handsome man, of tall, elegant figure and graceful carriage. He was extremely courteous to his officers.

At this time (March, 1853,) the Nicaragua route between New York and San Francisco was doing a good business; the trip between the two places was sometimes made in nineteen days, which was shorter than *via* Panama. The steamer from New York went to Greytown (San Juan de Nicaragua) and there the passengers were put on board light-draft, stern-wheel steamboats, which went up the San Juan river to Lake Nicaragua. Here, at a village called Fort San Carlos, they were transferred to commodious side-wheel steamboats in which they crossed the lake to Virgin Bay, and from Virgin Bay they crossed in a conveyance of some kind to San Juan del Sur, a distance of ten miles, and went on board the ocean steamer for San Francisco.

Greytown on the Mosquito coast claimed to be under the protection of England, though this was a matter of dispute. The whole Mosquito coast had been under the protection of the British for many years; but in 1850 the jealousy of the United States having long existed on this subject, the two governments covenanted "not to occupy, or fortify, or colonize, or assume or exercise any dominion over any part of Central America." The matter was finally settled in 1857 by Nicaragua taking possession of it.

The town at the time of our visit in the spring of 1853 was inhabited by a lawless set of desperadoes, of all nations, who had organized some kind of a city government. The mayor was said to have been an escaped convict from Sing Sing, and I believe it was so, for the others were evidently tarred

with the same brush. They resembled the old buccaneers in everything save courage.

These people made a living by preying upon the passengers passing to and from California, of whom large numbers were detained at Greytown a day or two at a time on their passage: more by design than by accident. Nearly every house in town was a hotel. The harbor here is formed by an island at the mouth of the river lying opposite Greytown; on this island the steamship company had its store-houses, and as long as the passengers were detained occasionally and sent ashore in the town to pass a night or two everything went smoothly; but finally the company decided to build a hotel on the island to keep the passengers on *their* side of the river during the transit and to prohibit their landing at Greytown at all; to do all the "skinning" itself in fact. This was more than the Greytowners could stand and they declared war to the knife. Getting wind of this state of affairs the *Cyane* went there to keep the peace. We arrived the very night the island was to be stormed and sacked, and landed a force to protect it. The Greytown gentlemen decided to postpone the attack until our departure. We kept our men on the island for a few days and the captain then issued a proclamation which he had posted in Greytown forbidding the inhabitants going there without first obtaining permission from the *Cyane*. He was soundly abused by them for this, but bore it philosophically, especially as the proclamation was obeyed. We remained here seventy mortal days, the dreariest time I ever passed in any foreign port, and that is saying a good deal. Our only excitement was caused by the arrival of the steamers from New York and New Orleans which made fortnightly trips and brought us our mails, and the arrival of the steamers from Lake Nicaragua with the San Francisco passengers.

I noticed a difference in the deportment of the outgoing and incoming passengers; those going out were full of fun and frolic, while those returning were more quiet, I suppose because they had either lost all hope or had made small fortunes



which they carried about their persons and were careful not to exhibit. In company with some of our officers I made a trip up the river as far as Castillo in one of the company's boats. Castillo, so called from an old Spanish fort built here to command the river, is about 15 miles from the lake. It was once taken by the English under Lord Nelson (then a post captain) and he lost a large number of men by fever. It is situated on a high hill overlooking a bend in the river and presents a most romantic appearance—all *ruins* do. In traveling in these countries one is surprised to see so many solidly built fortifications. The old saying is: "The Spanish build forts, the French take them, and the English hold them." We remained in Castillo a week and then went down the river in a crowded boat with the California passengers which we had not bargained for—there was no distinction made between cabin and steerage passengers, and as the latter made a practice of *shooting across the deck* at alligators on the banks, promenading was unhealthy—so we had to sit huddled together for three days. The man next me had the small-pox.

To add to our discomfort on board the *Cyane* we would occasionally find *snakes*; they would come floating down the river on drift wood, &c., and run up our cables. This was a thing I never could become used to, though they were said to be harmless. Our amusements consisted in fishing, and shooting alligators, or I should say of shooting *at* alligators—for I never saw one killed. We caught one in our seine once, and wild work he made of it. The men towed him off to the ship, and we hoisted him on board with the yard-tackle. The seine was about ruined; *but we got the alligator!* I here first eat the *Iguana*, cooked by a Mosquito Indian, and found it very palatable.

At last the time came when we were getting out of provisions, so we sailed for Pensacola. Here we found orders to sail for Portsmouth, N. H., there to join a flying squadron under Commodore W. B. Shubrick. We met the squadron at Portsmouth, having touched at Norfolk on our way up. The object

of this flying squadron, which consisted of four vessels, was to protect the fisheries.

The vessels now separated, each to visit different ports. We went first to Eastport, Maine, and thence to St. Johns, N. B. The tide rises and falls from twenty to twenty-five feet at these places and it is necessary to bear this in mind in selecting an anchorage. St. Johns, as seen from a vessel, presents at high water quite a different appearance from what it does at low water. We sailed from this place with a southwesterly wind, and proceeded to beat out of the Bay of Fundy. The night following was one of the most disagreeable I have ever passed at sea. I was navigating the ship again, and we were trying to make the light on Seal island. It was blowing and raining: thick as mud; the tide running four or five miles an hour, and no soundings to be had. Take it all in all it was a most trying night. The Seal islands are marked by the wrecks of many vessels, and no wonder—the frequent fogs alone are enough to account for it, to say nothing of the tides and the absence of soundings. We made the light at 4 A. M. and shortly after, I shaped a course for Cape Sable and turned in. I had a good joke on the captain a little later in the day. We were running along the land, about seven miles off, and steering due south. While I was breakfasting, the captain (who was a very bold navigator but much given to "chaffing") looked down the hatchway and inquired why I kept so far from the land, and "what I was afraid of?" I replied that I would explain, and going to his cabin I pointed out to him on the chart a rock marked with twelve feet water on it, about four miles off the land and directly in our track. It was marked "doubtful," and was not on all the charts, but as I said, the sea was so smooth it would not break on it and there would be nothing to indicate it; that it *might* be there, and I thought it better to "guard against all precautions," to use a slang of his own. The captain laughed at it, said there was no rock there, and compared me to old Bainbridge who "went forty miles out of his way to avoid a fly-speck," etc., etc.,



and directed me to haul the ship in to within three or four miles of the land. This I did, and soon forgot all about the matter. At meridian I observed the latitude and reported the result to the captain as usual, and then went to my room to compute the longitude. I had hardly reached it when the orderly came down and said the captain wanted me immediately. I hurried up to the cabin and found Captain Hollins plotting our position, from the latitude and estimated distance from the land, and it put us *right on top of the rock!*

He had consulted some other charts which had the rock marked down, and I found him somewhat disturbed. We were under starboard studding-sails and royals, and not knowing what better to do—for he knew we would strike the rock before seeing it if it were really there he took in all sail and hove the ship to. This extraordinary proceeding on a fine, clear day, with a fair wind, no doubt caused "Jack" much surprise: but we gave no explanation, and "Jack" is not much given to asking one. About 2 o'clock we filled away and made all sail without seeing any signs of the rock; whether it exists or not I do not know, but it was a long time before the captain said "rocks" or "fly-specks" to me again.

Captain Hollins was one of the most agreeable men I have ever sailed with; a prime seaman, he did not bother himself about trifles; but in a time of danger all under his command looked up to him and depended upon him. As an example of his readiness I may mention one incident, although it occurred after I had left the ship. The *Cyane* was running along the coast of New Jersey, in thick weather, and getting too close in struck on one of the dangerous shoals off Little Egg harbor. Captain H. sprang up on deck, clewed up everything, and let go the anchor. The weather clearing up just at this time several boats were seen making for the ship (which was then afloat and riding to her anchor) in great haste. As the first boat got alongside a man sprung up the ship's side and called out in an excited manner: "I'll wreck this ship; I claim her," etc., etc. Captain H. in a quiet manner asked

him what he meant. "Why, I thought you were on shore and wanted assistance," said the man. "Oh no," said Hollins—"I've only come in to take a look at the harbor." After some conversation of the same kind the man agreed to pilot the *Cyane* out through the shoals for the sum of ten dollars!

The captain used to relate a conversation he once had with a Dutch captain who took part in the bombardment of Algiers under Lord Exmouth in 1816. Three Dutch frigates which happened to be lying at Gibraltar when the English squadron arrived asked for and obtained permission to join it in the proposed expedition and they rendered good service. The Dutchman was complaining to Captain Hollins that the English papers did not give them proper credit for their action, &c., &c. "But," said Captain H., "the *Dutch* papers mentioned it, did they not?" "Oh yes!" was the reply, "de *Dutch* papers mentioned it, but who de debble ever reads de *Dutch* papers?"

It used to be said when I was a midshipman that one of our vessels once killed a man on board a Dutch frigate while firing a salute—the gunner had neglected to draw the shot from one of the guns. The American captain was much mortified and distressed at the occurrence and sent a lieutenant on board to express his regrets. The lieutenant found the Dutch captain coolly smoking his pipe and made the proper explanations, &c. "Oh!" said the captain: "There are plenty more Dutchmen in Holland!"

We rounded Cape Sable, and passing by Halifax went through the Straits of Canso into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. We saw here some of the grandest scenery I have ever beheld; Cape Breton island on one side and Nova Scotia on the other. I really had no expectation of it as I had never seen it mentioned. It only proves, what is often said, that Americans need not leave their own continent for magnificent scenery. I should like to describe the appearance of these straits as we entered them in the *Cyane* in September, 1853. I have the *idea*, but cannot find words to express it. I am, in point of fact, somewhat in the condition of Mr. Toots' tailor "who had



a pair of pantaloons in his mind, but *couldn't* cut them out." Not the first author who has found himself in the same predicament.

Our orders were to "sight" the Magdalen islands, and then sail around Cape Breton island on our way home. We had a fair wind and shaped a course directly for these islands which we expected to see about 11 P. M. I had read in the sailing directions that the "light," was very carelessly kept and sometimes not lighted at all, and as the night was very dark I could not help feeling uneasy and I several times remarked to the captain that perhaps he had better heave to until daylight. But he was anxious to get home and did not wish to lose any time; he told me that all he wanted was to "make the light," and he would then bear away for Cape North. I went forward and told the boatswain, whom I found on the fore-castle this, and remarked that all we wanted was to make the light which we should do at 11 o'clock. The boatswain said he would keep a lookout himself, and that *he had no doubt but that we would make the light very soon!* Singular to say just as the bell struck for 11 the lookout forward reported a light *right ahead!* "Hard aport" said the captain, and directing me to set the course he went below and turned in, and I shortly after followed his example. We returned to Portsmouth where we found the commodore and reported the particulars of our cruise. We then went to Philadelphia where I was detached and ordered to the Naval Academy, Annapolis, as an Assistant Professor of Mathematics.

The *Cyane* returned to Greytown in 1854 and bombarded it. I have really forgotten on what grounds Captain Hollins did this; but it was a nest of pirates, and the pity is he did not destroy the inhabitants and spare the houses. We often hear by the way of a man-of-war knocking towns down, blowing them to pieces, &c.; but it is easier said than done, and this I have always held to. Greytown was built entirely of wood, yet it stood a fire of shot and shell for four or five hours, and then a landing party had to be sent to *set it on fire!*

In the years 1853-4 great interest was felt in the explorations of the Isthmus of Darien, the object being to find a suitable place for a canal between the two oceans. Not that the idea of a canal was a new one by any means, for the Emperor Charles V sent a peremptory order to his governors on the isthmus to "cut a canal," and this was not many years after the discovery of the Pacific ocean or South sea as it was then called. It had long been thought that the Darien Indians knew of a short route across the isthmus if they could be gotten to reveal it. But these Indians were known to be jealous of strangers and very warlike in their disposition. They remain unconquered to the present day. Dampier who knew them well, having crossed the isthmus from the Gulf of San Miguel in 1681, says in speaking of a tribe living on the Atrato river: "They are very dreadful to the Spaniards and will not have any commerce with them nor with any white people. They use tubes about eight feet long out of which they blow poisoned darts."

Several travelers about this time (1853) professed to have crossed the isthmus in a few days time, and to have met with no very high elevations. These stories are now known to be false. In reading the accounts of Davis, Ringrose, Wafer, Dampier and others—all buccaneers, and who were frequently crossing in the latter part of the 17th century—I observe that the journey occupied from twelve to twenty days. The Indians did not know of a shorter route then or they would have shown it, because they were friendly to the buccaneers who they knew were crossing to the South sea to make war upon the Spaniards whom they held in deadly enmity. Lieutenant Isaac G. Strain of the navy got permission to organize a party and attempt to cross. The *Cyane* took him and his companions to Caledonia Bay in January, 1854. Captain Hollins called a council of the Indians in his cabin and finally they consented to allow the party to cross and to furnish guides. We all know the fate of this expedition. They started with 12 officers and 13 men on the 20th of January with ten days provisions—their guides left them the



second day after starting and they wandered helplessly in the woods until the men commenced to fall down and die of hunger. They were searching for the Savanna river to lead them into the Gulf of San Miguel and they struck the Chuquinaque which leads there by a much longer route. February 13th, Strain seeing that he would lose his entire party if help was not obtained took two of his strongest men and pushed on ahead leaving the others to follow under Passed Midshipman W. T. Truxtun (the present Commodore Truxtun.) Strain succeeded in getting to the Gulf of San Miguel on the 9th of March, and there fortunately found the English man-of-war *Virago*. A boat expedition was immediately fitted out and sent up the river with the necessary supplies. It found the party, March 23d, on the banks, in a half starved condition. It arrived just in time. Had it not been for the indomitable courage and perseverance of Truxtun and Jack Maury (an assistant engineer in the navy) the whole party would have died of starvation. Messrs. Polanco and Castilla, the Columbian commissioners, and six men perished. The survivors were taken to Panama, and finally returned to the United States in the *Cyane*, sailing from Panama April 25th.

The mistake made by Strain was in taking *sailors* for a land exploration; he might as well have taken a party of children. These men, with arms in their hands, were starving in a country abounding in game! Had he taken a few western hunters the fate of the expedition would have been different. The history (so called) of this expedition was written by Headley, and published in *Harper's Magazine*. It is much to be regretted that Commodore Truxtun, almost the only survivor, cannot be prevailed upon to write out a full account of it.

In 1858 I met in the Pacific a Lieutenant Moore of the British Navy who gave me an interesting account of *his* experience on the Isthmus. He set out with Captain Prevost and a number of men to cross from the Pacific to the Atlantic side. They went up to the head of the Gulf of San Miguel (I

think) in boats and there, hiding a portion of their provisions, they left four men to guard the boats, and started for the interior. They met with such difficulties that they made but slow progress, and finally had to return. When they got back to the boats they found the four men lying dead, shot by the Indians with poisoned arrows. The rest of the party got back safely to their ship. These Indians told Captain Prevost afterward they would not have killed these men had they known they were English. They thought they were Spaniards, for whom they have an undying hatred. It is curious to note how this feeling has been handed down among them by tradition. They still remember that the English crossed the Isthmus in the early days to fight the Spaniards, who at the time held their ancestors in the most cruel servitude wherever they could lay hands upon them.

The same friendship for the English exists at this day among the Mosquito Indians, the foundation of which was laid by these same buccaneers. Dampier says of them: "They are tall, well made, raw-boned, lusty, strong and nimble of foot, long visaged, lank black hair, look stern, hard favored, and of a dark copper-color complexion. They are but a small nation, and not one hundred men of them in number, inhabiting on the main near Cape Gratias à Dios. They are very ingenious at throwing the lance, fishgig, and harpoon. They have extraordinary good eyes, and will descry a sail at sea farther, and see anything better than we. Their chief employment in their own country is to strike fish and turtle. For this they are esteemed and coveted by all privateers; for one or two of them in a ship will maintain a hundred men; and it is very rare to find privateers destitute of one or more of them when the commander or most of the men are English. But they do not love the French, and the Spanish they hate mortally."