

Eggleston George Cary

The Wreck of the Red Bird: A Story of the Carolina Coast



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CHAPTER I

MAUM SALLY'S MANNERS

"Bress my heart, honey, wha'd you come from?"

It was old "Maum" Sally who uttered this exclamation as she came out of her kitchen, drying her hands on her apron, and warmly greeting one of the three boys who stood just outside the door.

"Is you done come to visit de folks? Well, I do declar'!"

"Now, Maum Sally," replied Ned Cooke, "stop 'declaring' and stop asking me questions till you answer mine. Or, no, you won't do that, so I'll answer yours first. Where did I come from? Why from Aiken, by way of Charleston and Hardeeville. Did I come to visit the folks? Well, no, not exactly that. You see, I didn't set out to come here at all. I have spent part of the summer up at Aiken with these two school-mates of mine, and they were to spend the rest of it with me in Savannah. We were on our way down there when I got a despatch from father, saying that as yellow fever

has broken out there I mustn't come home, but must come down here to Bluffton and stay with Uncle Edward till frost or school time. So we got off the train, hired a man with an ox-cart to bring our trunks down, and walked the eighteen miles. The man with the trunks will get here sometime, I suppose. There! I've made a long speech at you. Now, answer my questions, please. Where is Uncle Edward? and where is Aunt Helen? and why is the house shut up? and when will they be back again? and can't you give us something to eat, for we're nearly starved?"

Ned laughed as he delivered this volley of questions, but Maum Sally remained perfectly solemn, as she always did. When he finished, she said:

"Yaller fever! Bress my heart! It'll be heah nex' thing we knows. Walked all de way from Hardeeville! an' dis heah hot day too! e'en a'most starved! Well, I reckon ye is, an' I'll jes mosey roun' heah an' git you some supper."

It must be explained that Maum Sally, although she lived on the coast of South Carolina, and was called "Maum" instead of "Aunt," was born and "raised," as she would have said, in "Ole Firginny," and her dialect was therefore somewhat as represented here. The negroes of the coast speak a peculiar jargon, which would be wholly unintelligible to other than South Carolinian readers, even if I could render it faithfully by phonetic spelling.

As Maum Sally ceased speaking, she turned to go into her kitchen, which, as is usual in the South, was a detached building, standing some distance from the main house.

"But wait, Maum Sally," cried Ned, seizing her hand; "I'm not going to let you off that way. You haven't answered my questions yet."

"Now, look heah, young Ned," she said, with great solemnity, "does you s'pose Ole Sally was bawn and raised in Ole Firginny for nothin'? I aint forgot my manners nor hospitality, ef I *is* lived nigh onto twenty-five years in dis heah heathen coast country whah de niggas talks monkey language. I'se a gwine to git you'n your fr'en's – ef you'll interduce 'em – some supper, fust an' foremost. Den I'll answer all de questions you're a mind to ax, ef you don't git to conundrumin'."

Ned acknowledged Maum Sally's rebuke promptly.

"I did forget my manners," he said, "but you see I was badly flustered. This is my friend Jack Farnsworth, Maum Sally, and this," turning to the other boy, "is Charley Black. Boys, let me make you acquainted with Maum Sally, the best cook in South Carolina, or anywhere else, and the best Maum Sally in the world. She used to give me all sorts of good things to eat out here when I didn't get up to breakfast, and was expected to get on till dinner with a cold bite from the store-room. I'll bet she'll cook us a supper that will make your mouths water, and have it ready by the time we get the dust out of our eyes."

"Git de dus' out'n de all over you, more like. Heah's de key to de bath-house. You jes run down an' take a dip in de salt water, an' den git inter yer clo'es as fas' as you kin, an' when you's done dat, you'll fin' somethin' to eat awaitin' for you in de piazza. Git,

now, quick. Ef I'se got to plan somethin' for supper, I'se got to hab my wits about me an' don' want no talkin' boys aroun'."

"It's of no use, boys," said Ned. "I know Maum Sally, and we're not going to get a word more out of her till supper is ready, so come on, let's have a plunge. It's all right, anyhow. My uncle and aunt have gone away for the day somewhere, I suppose, and will be back sometime to-night. If they don't come, I'll find a way to break into the house. It's my father's, you know, and one of my homes. In fact, I was born here. Uncle Edward lives here a good part of the time, because he likes it, and father lives in Savannah a good part of the year, because he doesn't like it here. Come, let's get a bath."

With that Ned conducted his guests to a pretty little bath-house which stood out over the water, and was approached by a green bridge. Bluffton abounds in these well-appointed, private bathing-houses, which, with their ornamental approaches, add not a little to the beauty of the singular town, which is scarcely a town at all in the ordinary sense of the word, as Ned explained to his companions while they were dressing after their bath.

"This coast country," he said, "is plagued with country fever."

"What's country fever?" asked Jack Farnsworth.

"It's a very severe and fatal form of bilious fever, which one night's exposure – or even a few hours' exposure after sunset – brings on."

"Then why did you bring us here?" asked Charley. "Are we to find ourselves down with country fever to-morrow morning?"

"No, not at all," replied Ned. "Country fever stays strictly at home. It never goes to town; it never visits high ground where there are pines, white sand, and no moss; and it never comes to Bluffton. That's why there is any Bluffton. All along the coast the planters have their winter residences on their plantations, but in the summer they go off to little summer villages in the pines to escape the fever. In the region just around us, it is so much easier and pleasanter to live here in Bluffton that they build permanent residences here and live here all the year around. There is no trade here, no shops – except a blacksmith shop out on the road – no stores, no any thing except private houses, and the private houses are all built pretty nearly alike. Each stands alone in a large plot of ground, which is filled with trees and shrubs just as all the streets are. Each house has a piazza running all the way around it, or pretty nearly that, and each has two or three joggling boards."

"What in the world is a joggling board?" asked Charley.

"I'll introduce you when we get back to the house," said Ned.

When the boys returned to the house, Ned's prediction was abundantly fulfilled. Maum Sally had spread a tempting, if somewhat incongruous supper in the piazza. There was a piece of cold ham, some fried fresh fish, a dish of shrimps stewed with tomatoes, a great platter of rice cooked in the South Carolinian way, and intended for use in lieu of bread, some boiled okra, roast sweet potatoes, and a pot of steaming coffee. It was a miscellaneous sort of meal, compounded of breakfast, dinner, and supper in about equal proportions, but it was such a meal as

three healthy boys, who had walked eighteen miles and had then taken a sea bath, were not in the least disposed to quarrel with.

"Now, Maum Sally," said Ned, after he had complimented the supper and taken his seat at the table, "tell me where Uncle Edward and Aunt Helen are, and when they will get back?"

"Ain't ye got no manners at all, young Ned?" asked Sally, with an air of profound surprise; she always called the boy "Young Ned" when she wished to put him in awe of her; "ain't ye got no manners at all, or is you forgot 'em all sence I seed you last? Don' you know your frien's is a starvin'? and here you is a plaguin' me with questions insti'd o' helpin' on 'em. Mind yer manners, young gentleman, an' then I'll answer yer questions."

"All right, Maum Sally," said Ned; "Charley, let me give you some cold ham. Jack, help yourself to some fish. There are the shrimps, boys, between you. Maum Sally, pour out some coffee, please. Jack, you'll find the okra good; here, Charley, let me help you to rice."

Maum Sally, meanwhile, was pouring coffee and filling plates; when supper was well under way, she stood back a little way, placed her hands on her hips, her arms akimbo, and said with the utmost solemnity:

"Seems 's if somebody axed me somethin' or other 'bout de folks when I was too busy to ten' to 'em. Ef you'll ax me agin now, I'll be obleeged."

"Yes, upon reflection," said Ned, "I am inclined to think that I ventured to make some inquiry concerning my uncle and aunt.

If I remember correctly, I asked where they are, and at what time they are likely to return."

"Whah is dey? Well, I don' rightly know, an' I can't say adzac'ly when dey'll be back agin. But I specs deys somewhah out on de sea, an' I s'pose dey'll be back about nex' November."

"What!" cried Ned, in surprise, suspending his attention to supper, and forgetting to maintain his pretence of dignified indifference. "What do you mean, Maum Sally?"

"Well, what I mean is dis heah. Yo' uncle an' aunt lef' here three days ago to go north. Dey said dey was a gwine to de centenimental expedition, an' to Newport an' somewhahs else – I reckon it was to some sort o' mountains – White Mountains, mebbe, an dey said dey'd be back agin in November, ef dey didn't make up dere minds to stay longer, or come back afore dat time. So now you knows as much about it as I does."

CHAPTER II

ON THE JOGGLING BOARDS

To say that Ned was surprised is to describe his feeling very mildly. Knowing his uncle's easy, indolent mode of life, his contentment with home, his lazy love of books and pipes and ease generally, Ned would as soon have expected to hear that the organ in the little church had gone off summering, as to learn that his uncle and aunt were travelling.

The other boys were in consternation.

"What on earth shall we do?" asked Jack Farnsworth.

"Better eat supper, fust an' fo'most," replied Maum Sally, whose theory of life consisted of a profound conviction that the important thing to be done was to eat an abundance of good food, well-cooked.

"That's so," said Ned. "We can't bring my uncle back by neglecting our supper, but we can let the coffee get cold, and that would be a pity. Let's eat now while the things are hot."

"Yes," replied Charley Black, "that's all right, but after that?"

"Why, after that we'll try the joggling boards."

"But, Ned," remonstrated Charley, "this won't do. Your uncle has gone away, and the house is shut up and so we can't stay here. Now, I move that you go back to Aiken with us."

"Not a bit of it," answered Ned. "I've visited at your house and

at Jack's, and now you're my guests. Do you think I've 'forgot my manners,' as Maum Sally says?"

"But, Ned," said Jack, "you see the situation has changed since we started to go home with you. You can't go home, and now you can't stay here."

"Can't I though?" asked Ned; "and why not? I know a way into the house, and if you'll stay where you are for five minutes, I'll have the big doors unbarred and invite you in."

With that Ned stepped upon the piazza railing, caught a timber above, and easily swung himself up to the roof of the porch. Thence he made his way quickly to a round window in the garret – the house was only one story high, with a high garret story for the protection of the rooms from the heat of the sun. Pushing open this round window he sprang in, descended the stairs, and a moment later the boys heard him taking down the wooden bar which kept the great double doors fast. Then drawing the bolts at top and bottom, he swung the doors open without difficulty.

"Come in, boys," he cried. "I'll open the doors at the other side, and we'll have a breeze through the hall."

"But I say, old fellow," said Charley, "I don't like this. What will your uncle think of us for making free with his house in this way?"

"What, Uncle Edward? Why, he wouldn't ask how we got in if he were to get home now. He never troubles himself, and he's the best uncle in the world; so is Aunt Helen, or, I should say, she is the best aunt. And, besides, I tell you, this isn't Uncle Edward's

house. It's my father's, and all the furniture is his too. Uncle Edward lives here just because he likes it here, and because father likes to have him here. But the house is ours, and sometimes we all come here without warning, and stay for months. It don't make any difference, except that more plates are put on the table. Every thing goes on just the same, and if Uncle Edward were to come in now he would hardly remember that we weren't here when he went away. So make yourselves easy. You're in my home just as much as if we were in Savannah, and there's nobody here to be bothered by our fun. We'll stay here and fish and row and bathe, and have a jolly time. The servants have all gone away, I suppose, except Maum Sally, but she'll take good care of us. You see, I'm her special pet. She has thought it her duty to coddle me and scold me and regulate me generally ever since I was born, and she likes nothing better. So come on out here and I'll introduce you unfortunate up-country boys to that greatest of human inventions, a joggling board. There are four or five of them on the front piazza."

This hospitable harangue satisfied the scruples of the boys, and the house was so pleasant, with its large, high rooms, wide hall, and broad piazzas – one of which looked out over the water, – the grounds were so tasteful, the trees so large and fine, and the whole aspect of Bluffton was so quiet and restful, that they were glad to settle themselves contentedly after their long tramp from the railroad at Hardeeville.

"The best way to get acquainted with a joggling board," said

Ned, approaching a queer-looking structure on the piazza, "is to get on it. Try it and see, Charley. Don't be afraid. It won't turn over, and it can't break down. There," as Charley seated himself upon the board, "lie down now, and move almost any muscle you please the least bit in the world, and you'll understand what the thing is for."

"Oh! isn't it jolly!" exclaimed Charley, as the board began to sway gently under him and the breeze from the sea fanned him.

"It is all of that," replied Ned. "I'll get some pillows as soon as I get Jack to risk his precious neck on a board, and then we'll all be comfortable, like clams at high-tide. Jump up, Jack; it won't tip over. Now swing your legs up and lie down. There, how's that?"

Jack gave a sigh of satisfaction, while Ned ran into the house for sofa pillows. The three boys, tired as they were, soon ceased to talk, and fell asleep to the gentle swaying of the joggling boards.

CHAPTER III

AFLOAT

Once asleep on the cool, breeze-swept piazza, the three tired boys were not inclined to wake easily. The sun went down, but still they slept. Finally the teamster from Hardeeville arrived with the trunks on an ox-cart, and his loud cries to his oxen aroused Charley, who sprang up suddenly. Forgetting that his couch was a joggling board more than three feet high he undertook to step upon the floor as if he had been sleeping on an ordinary sofa. The result was that his feet, failing to reach the floor at the expected distance, were thrown backward under the board by the forward motion of the upper part of the body, and Master Charles Black, of Aiken, fell sprawling on the floor, waking both the other boys in alarm.

"What's up?" cried Ned.

"Nothing. I'm down," replied Charley. "I thought you said the thing wouldn't turn over."

"Well, it hasn't," said Ned. "Look and see. It's you that turned over. Are you hurt, old fellow?"

Charley was by this time on his feet again, and declared himself wholly free from hurt of any kind. The trunks were brought in, the driver turned over to Maum Sally's hospitality, and Ned declared it to be time for bed.

"Whew! how cold it is!" exclaimed Jack. "Do you have such changes of weather often, down here on the coast?"

"Only twice in twenty-four hours at this season," answered Ned, as they went into the house.

"Twice in twenty-four hours! What do you mean?"

"I mean once in twelve hours," answered Ned.

"How is that? I don't understand."

"Well, you see our late summer dews have begun to fall. If you were to go out now, you would find the water actually dripping from the trees. From this time on it will be chilly at night, almost cold, in fact, but hot as the tropic of Cancer in the daytime. So we have a sudden change of temperature twice a day – once from cold to hot, and once from hot to cold."

The boys were too sleepy to talk long, and the sun was shining in at the east windows when Maum Sally waked them the next morning for a breakfast as miscellaneous as the supper had been; sliced tomatoes and figs, still wet with the dew, being prominent features of the meal.

After breakfast Ned looked up a great variety of fishing tackle and got it in order.

"Where are your fish poles?" asked one of the boys.

"Fish poles! we don't use them in salt water. We fish with tight lines."

"What are they?"

"Why, long lines with a sinker at the end and no poles."

"Do you just hold the line in your hand?"

"Certainly. And another thing that we don't use is a float. We just fish right down in the deep water – or the shallow water rather, for the best fishing is on bars where the water isn't more than twenty feet deep; but deep or shallow, the fish are at the bottom, except skip-jacks; they swim on top, and sometimes we troll for them. They call them blue fish up North, I believe, but we call them skip-jacks or jack mackerel."

"What's that?" asked Jack, as Ned spread out a round net for inspection.

"A cast net."

"What's it for?"

"Shrimps."

"But I thought we were going fishing."

"So we are. But we must go shrimping first. We must have some bait."

"Oh, we are to use shrimps for bait, are we?"

"Very much so indeed," answered Ned. "They are capital bait – the best we have, unless we want to catch sheephead; then we use fiddlers."

"What are fiddlers?"

"Little black crabs that run about by millions over the sand. They have hard shells that whiting and croakers can't crack, while the sheephead, having good teeth, crush them easily. So when we want to catch sheephead, and don't want to be bothered with other fish, we bait with fiddlers."

"Then I understand that fish are so plentiful here and so easily

caught that they bother you when you want to catch particular kinds?" said Jack, incredulously.

"If you mean that for a question," answered Ned, "I'll let you answer it for yourself after you've had a little experience."

"Well, if we don't get any shrimps," said Charley, "we'll fish for sheephead with musicians."

"Musicians? oh, you mean fiddlers," said Ned. "But we'll get shrimps enough."

"Do they bother you, too, with their abundance?" asked Jack, still inclined to joke his friend.

"Come on and see," said Ned, who had now prepared himself for wading.

Taking the cast net in his hand, and giving a pail to Jack, he led the way to the sea. Wading into the mouth of a little inlet he cast the net, which was simply a circular piece of netting, with a string of leaden balls around the edge. From this lead line cords extended on the under side of the net to and through a ring in the centre where they were fastened to a long cord which was held in Ned's hand. A peculiar motion in casting caused the net to spread itself out flat and to fall in that way on the water. The leaden balls caused it to sink at once to the bottom, the edges reaching bottom first, of course, and imprisoning whatever happened to be under the net in its passage. After a moment's pause, to give time for the lead line to sink completely, Ned jerked the cord and began to draw in. Of course this drew the lead line along the bottom to the centre ring, and made a complete pocket of the

net, securely holding whatever was caught in it.

It came up after this first cast with about a hundred shrimps – of the large kind called prawn in the North – in it. The boys opened their eyes in surprise, and Ned cast again, bringing up this time about twice as many as before.

"They have hardly begun to come in yet," said Ned. "The tide is too young."

"Hardly begun to come in?" said Jack, "why, the water's alive with them. Let me throw the net."

"Certainly," said Ned, "if you know how."

"Know how? Why, there's no knack in that; anybody can do it."

With this confident boast Jack took the net and gave a violent cast. Neglecting to relax the rope at the right moment, however, the confident young gentleman made trouble for himself. The lead line swung around rapidly, the net wrapped itself around Jack, and the leaden balls struck him with sufficient violence to hurt. He lost his balance at the same instant, and, his legs being held close together by the wet net, he could not step out to recover himself. The result was that he fell sprawling into the water and was fished out in a very wet condition by his companions.

Jack was a boy capable of seeing the fun even in an accident of which he was the victim. He stood still while the net was unwound, and for a moment afterward. Then, seeing that the other boys were too considerate to laugh at him while in trouble, he quietly said:

"I told you I could do it."

"Well, you caught more in the net than I did," said Ned. "Now take hold again and I'll show you how to manage it. Your wet clothes won't hurt you. Sea-water doesn't give one cold."

A few lessons made Jack fairly expert in casting, but Charley had no mind to court mishaps, and would not try his skill. The pail was soon well filled with shrimps, and the boys returned to the boat house, where Jack changed his wet clothes for dry ones.

Then all haste was made to get the boat out, in order that they might fish while the tide was right. The boat was a large launch named *Red Bird*; a boat twenty-four feet long, very broad in the beam, and very stoutly built. It was provided with a mast and sail, but these were of no use now as there was no wind, and the bars on which Ned meant to fish were only a few hundred yards distant.

No sooner was the anchor cast than the lines were out, and the fish began accepting the polite invitation extended to them.

"What sort of fish are these, Ned?" asked Charley, as he took one from his hook.

"That," said Ned, looking round, "is a whiting – so called, I believe, because it is brown, and yellow, and occasionally pink and purple, with changeable silk stripes over it. That's the only reason I can think of for calling it a whiting. It is never white. It isn't properly a whiting for that matter. It isn't at all the same as the whiting of the North, at any rate."

"Why, they're changing color," exclaimed Jack.

"Look! they actually change color under your very eyes."

"Yes, it's a way whiting have," said Ned. "And some other fish do the same thing, I believe."

"Dolphins do," said Charley.

"Yes, but the whiting isn't even a second cousin to the dolphin. That's a croaker you've got, Jack; spot on his tail – splendid fish to eat – and he croaks. Listen!"

The fish did begin to utter a curious croaking sound, which surprised the boys. Other croakers were soon in the boat, and the company of them set up a croaking of which the inhabitants of a frog pond might not have been ashamed.

"They call croakers 'spot' in Virginia," said Ned, "because of the spot near the tail. Look at it. Isn't it pretty? and isn't the fish itself a beauty?"

"But the whiting is prettier," said Charley; "at least in colors. I say, Ned, do you know if whiting ever dine on kaleidoscopes?"

"Look out! hold that fellow away from you! hold the line at arm's length and don't let the brute strike you with his tail for your life!" exclaimed Ned, excitedly, as Charley drew a curious-looking creature up.

"What is the thing?" asked both the up-country boys in a breath.

"A stingaree," replied Ned, "and as ugly as a rattlesnake. See how viciously he strikes with his tail! Let him down slowly till his tail touches the bottom of the boat. There! Now wait till he stops striking for a moment and then clap your foot on his tail.

Ah! now you've got him. Now cut the tail off close to the body and the fellow's harmless."

"What is the creature anyhow?" asked Jack, who had suspended his fishing operations to observe the monster. "What did you call it?"

"Well, the gentleman belongs to a large and distinguished family. To speak broadly, he is a plagiostome chondropterygian, of the sub-order *raiiæ*, commonly called skates. To define him more particularly, he is a member of the trygonidæ family, familiarly known as sting rays, and called by negroes and fishermen, and nearly every body else on the coast, stingarees."

"Where on earth did you get that jargon from?" asked Charley.

"It isn't jargon, and I got it from my uncle. He told me one day not to call these things stingarees, but sting rays, and then for fun rattled off a lot of scientific talk at me, which I made him repeat until I knew it by heart. What I know about sting rays is this: there are a good many kinds of them in different quarters of the world. In the North they have the American sting ray, which is much larger than ours down here, though we sometimes catch them two or three feet wide. Ours is the European sting ray, I believe; at any rate, it isn't the American. They are all of them closely alike. They are brown on top and white beneath. You see the shape – not unlike that of a turtle, but with something like wings at the sides, and with a skin instead of a shell, and no legs. The most interesting things about them are their long, slender tails. See," picking up the amputated tail and turning it over; "see the

gentleman's weapons. Those bony spikes, with their barbed sides, make very ugly wounds whenever the sting ray gets a good shot at a leg or an arm. The negroes say the barbs are poisonous, like a rattlesnake's fangs; but the scientific folk dispute that. However that may be, a man was laid up for three months right here in Bluffton, during the war, with a foot so bad that the surgeons thought they would have to cut it off, and all from a very slight wound by a sting-ray."

"Ugh!" cried Jack. "It isn't necessary to suppose poison; to have one of those horrible bones driven into your flesh and then drawn out with the notches all turned the wrong way, is enough to make any amount of trouble, without adding poison."

"Perhaps that accounts for the stories told of the Indians shooting poisoned arrows," said Ned. "They used sting-ray stings for arrow-heads at any rate."

"And very capital arrow-heads they would make," said Charley, examining the spikes, which were about the size of a large lead-pencil, about three or four inches long, and barbed all along the sides, so that they looked not unlike rye beards under a microscope. These spikes are placed not at the end of the tail, but near the middle.

"Are sting rays good to eat?" asked Jack, examining the slimy, flabby creature.

"It all depends upon the taste of the eater," replied Ned. "The negroes sometimes eat the flaps or wings, and most white people on the coast have curiosity enough to taste them. They always say

there's nothing bad about the taste, but I never knew anybody to take to sting rays as a delicacy. Some people say that alligator steaks are good, and a good many people eat sharks now and then. For my part good fish are too plentiful here for me to experiment with bad ones."

The fishing was resumed now, and it was not long before Jack confessed that the fish were beginning to "bother" him by their abundance and eagerness.

"Ned," he said, "I apologize. If you've any fiddlers about your clothes, I believe I'll confine my attention to sheephead; I'm tired of pulling fish in."

"Well, let's go ashore, then," said Ned, laughing, "and have dinner."

"Do fish bite in that way generally down here?" asked Charley.

"Yes, when the tide isn't too full. Fishing really gets to be a bore here, it is so easy to fill a boat; anybody can do that as easily as throw a cast net."

"Now hush that," said Charley. "Jack has owned up and apologized, and agreed that he knows more than he did this morning."

CHAPTER IV

PLANS AND PREPARATIONS

After dinner the boys lolled upon the piazza, and Ned answered his companions' questions concerning Bluffton and region round about.

"The water here is called South May River," he said, "but why, I don't know. It certainly isn't a river. This whole coast is a ragged edge of land with all sorts of inlets running up into it, and with islands, big and little, dotted about off the mainland. Yonder is Hilton Head away over near the horizon. Hunting Island lies off to the left, and Bear's Island further away yet. The little marsh islands have no names. They are simply bars of mud on which a kind of rank grass, called salt marsh, grows. Some of them are covered by every tide; others only by spring-tides, while others are covered by all except neap-tides."

"Is there any land over that way, to the right of Hilton Head?" Charley asked.

"Good idea!" exclaimed Ned. "I say, let's go buffalo-hunting and crusoeing and yachting all at once."

"What sort of answer is that nonsense to my question?" asked Charley, with mock dignity and real doubt as to his friend's meaning.

"Well, I jumped a little, that's all," said Ned. "Your question

suggested my answer. Bee Island lies over there, out of sight. It's my uncle's land. It used to be a sea-island plantation, but was abandoned during the war and has never been occupied since. It has grown up and is as wild as if it had never been cultivated at all. The cattle were left on it when the place was abandoned, and they went completely wild. During the war parties of soldiers from both sides used to go over there to hunt the wild cattle. Sometimes they met each other and hunted each other instead of the cattle. Now it just occurred to me that we might have jolly fun by fitting out an expedition, sailing over there in the *Red Bird*— you see these land-locked waters are never very rough or dangerous – and camping there as long as we like. When we are in the boat, we will be yachtsmen of the 'swellest' sort; when we're on the desert island – or deserted, rather, for it is desert only in the past tense – we'll be Robinson Crusoes; and when we want beef we'll kill a wild cow, if there are any left, and be buffalo hunters, for what's a buffalo but a sort of wild cow?"

"Is the fishing good over there?" asked Jack, "for I'm not so much bothered by the fish yet that I want to quit catching them."

"As good as here."

"All right, let's go," said Jack.

"So say I," responded Charley. "When shall we start?"

"To-morrow morning. It will take all this afternoon to get ready," said Ned.

With that they set to work collecting necessary materials.

"We must have all sorts of things," said Ned.

"Yes," answered Jack, "particularly in our characters as Robinson Crusoes."

"How's that?" asked Charley. "He had nothing. He was shipwrecked, you know."

"Yes, I know. But did you never notice what extraordinary luck he had? Absolutely every thing that was indispensable to him came ashore or was brought ashore from that accommodating wreck. Why, he even got gunpowder enough to last him, and whatever the ship didn't yield the island did. I always suspected that Robinson Crusoe loaded that ship himself with special reference to his needs on the island, and picked out the right island, and then ran the ship on the rocks purposely."

This interpretation of Robinson Crusoe's character and life was a novel one to Jack's companions; but their plan for their expedition did not include any purpose to deny themselves needed conveniences.

The large duck gun was taken down from its hooks in the hall, and a good supply of ammunition was put into the shot pouches and powder flask. This included one pouch of buckshot and one of smaller shot for fowls. The fishing tackle was already in the boat house, as we know. An axe, a hatchet, a piece of bacon, to be used in frying fish, a small bag of rice, another of flour, and another of sweet potatoes, a box of salt, another of sugar – both water-tight, – and some coffee, completed the list of stores as planned by the boys. Maum Sally contemplated the collection, after the boys had declared it to be complete, and exclaimed;

"Well, I 'clar now!"

"What's the matter, Maum Sally?" asked Ned.

"Nothin', on'y it's jis zactly like a passel o' boys, dat is."

"What is?"

"W'y wot for is you a takin' things to eat?" asked Sally.

"Because we'll want to eat them," said Ned.

"Raw?" asked Sally.

"That's so," said Ned, with a look of confusion. "Boys, we haven't put in a single cooking utensil!"

Laughing at their blunder, the boys set about choosing from Maum Sally's stores what they thought was most imperatively needed. Two skillets, one to be used for frying and the other for baking bread; a kettle, to be used in boiling rice, in heating water for coffee, and as a bread pan in which to mix corn bread; a coffee pot; some tin cups; three forks and three plates, constituted their outfit.

Each boy had his pocket knife, of course, and Ned had put into the boat a large hunting knife from the house.

When all was stored ready for the morning's departure, the boys ate their supper and betook themselves to the piazza.

"I hope there'll be a fair breeze in the morning," said Ned, "for it will be a frightful job to row that big boat to Bee Island if there isn't wind enough to sail."

"How far is it?" asked Jack.

"About a dozen miles. But there is nearly always, breeze enough to sail, after we get away from the bluffs here; but the

tide will be against us."

"How do you know?" asked Charley.

"Why it will begin running up about eight o'clock to-morrow, and of course it won't turn till about two."

"How do you know it will begin running up about eight o'clock?"

"Why, because it began running up a little after seven this morning."

"Well, what has that got to do with it? Don't it all depend on the wind?"

"What a landlubber you are!" exclaimed Ned. "No, it don't depend on the wind. It depends on the moon and the sun. I'll try to explain."

"No, don't," said Jack; "let him read about it in his geography, or explain it to him some other time. Tell us about something else now. Isn't the country fever likely to bother us over there on the island?"

"No, not if we select a good place to camp in. We must get on pretty high ground near the salt water. I know the look of healthy and unhealthy places pretty well, and we'll be safe enough."

"All right. When we get into camp you can deliver that lecture on tides if you want to, but just now we wouldn't attend to it. We're apt to be a trifle cross in the evenings over there if we get tired. Tired people in camp are always cross, and it will be just as well to save whatever you have to say till we need something to talk about. Then you can tell us all about it."

"Well, now, I've something interesting to tell you without waiting," said Ned; "something very interesting."

"What is it?"

"That it is after nine o'clock; that we want to get up early; and that we'd better go to bed."

"Agreed," said his companions.

CHAPTER V

THE SAILING OF THE "RED BIRD."

The boys were out of bed not long after daylight the next morning. The sky was clear, but there was not a particle of breeze, and even before the sun rose the air was hot and stifling to a degree never before experienced by either of Ned's visitors.

"I say, Ned, this is a frightful morning," said Jack. "I feel myself melting as I stand here in my clothes. I'm already as weak as a pound of butter looks in the sun. How we're going to breathe when the sun comes up, I'm at a loss to determine. Whew!" and with that Jack sat down exhausted.

"A nice time we'll have rowing," said Charley. "I move we swim and push the boat. It'll be cooler, and not much harder work. Does it ever rain here? because if it does I'm waiting for a shower. I'm wilted down, and nothing short of a drenching will revive me."

"Well," said Ned, "come, let's take a drenching. I'm going to take a header off the boat-house pier. It's low-water now, and there's a clear jump of ten feet. A plunge will wake us up, and by that time breakfast will be ready, and what is more to the point, the tide will turn. That's a comfort."

"Why?" asked Charley.

"Because when it turns a sea-breeze will come with it. This sort of heat is what we'd have here all summer long if it wasn't for land- and sea-breezes. As it is we never have it except at dead low water, and it is always followed by a good stiff sea-breeze when the tide turns. We'll be able to sail instead of swimming over to the island. But come, let's have our plunge now."

After breakfast the boys went to the boat house to bestow their freight in the boat. The tide had turned, and, as Ned had predicted, a cool, stimulating breeze had begun to blow, so that the strength returned to Jack's knees and Charley's resolution.

"It will be best to fill the boat's water kegs," said Ned; "partly because we'll want water on the way, partly because we'll want water on the island, while we're digging for a permanent supply."

"By the way," said Jack, "what are we going to dig with?"

"Well, there's another blunder," said Ned. "If Robinson Crusoe had forgotten things in that way, he never would have lived through his island experiences. We must have a shovel and a pick. I'll run up to the house and look for them while you boys fill the water kegs."

When Ned got back to the boat he was confronted by Maum Sally with a big bundle.

"What is it, Maum Sally?"

"Oh nothin', on'y I spose you young gentlemen is a gwine to sleep jes a little now an' then o' nights, an' so, as you hasn't thought on it yerse'fs, I's done brung you some bedclo'es."

"Now look here, boys," said Ned; "we'll go off without our

heads yet. We've lost our heads several times already, in fact. There's nothing for it except just to imagine ourselves at the island, and run through a whole day and night in our minds to see what we're going to need."

"That's a good idea," said Charley. "I'll begin. I'll need my mother the first thing, because here's a button off my collar."

The party laughed, of course, but there was force in the suggestion. A few buttons, a needle or two, and some stout thread were straightway added to the ship's stores.

"Now let's see," said Ned. "We'll need to build a shelter first thing, and we've all the tools necessary for that, because I've thought it out carefully. Then we have our digging tools. Very well. Now, for breakfast we need, let me see," and he ran over the materials and utensils already enumerated. Going on in this way through an imaginary day on the island, the boys found their list of stores now reasonably complete. From Maum Sally's bundle they selected three blankets, which they rolled up tight and bestowed behind the water keg at the stern. Maum Sally had brought pillows, sheets, and a large mattress, which she earnestly besought them to take, but they declined to add to their cargo any thing which could be dispensed with. At the very last moment one of the boys thought of matches. It was decided that three small boxes would be sufficient, as they could keep fire by the exercise of a little caution.

Thus equipped, they bade Maum Sally good-by, and cast the boat loose. The sail filled, the *Red Bird* lay a little over upon one

side, with the wind nearly abeam, and the boys settled themselves into their places.

"I say, young Ned," called Maum Sally, "how long's ye mean to be gone?"

"Oh, I don't know. May be a month," was the reply.

"Well, not a day longer 'n dat, now mind."

CHAPTER VI

ODD FISH

The sea-breeze was fresh and full, and it blew from a favorable quarter. There were various windings about among the small islands to be made, and now and then the course for a brief distance was against the wind, and as this was the case only where the channel was narrow, it was necessary to make a series of very short "tacks," which gave Ned an opportunity to instruct his companions in the art of sailing a boat. In the main, however, there was an abundance of sea-room, and Ned could lay his course directly for Bee Island and keep the wind on the quarter. It was barely eleven o'clock, therefore, when the *Red Bird* came to her moorings on the island, and the boys went ashore.

"Now the first thing that Robinson Crusoe did after he got his wits about him," said Jack, "was to build his residence. Let's follow the example of that experienced mariner, and choose our building-site before we begin to bring away things from the wreck; I mean, before we unload our plunder."

"Yes, that's our best plan," said Ned. "We don't want to do any more carrying than we must. Let me see. We're on the north side of the island. If I remember right, the negro quarters used to be to the east of this spot, and the negroes must have got water from somewhere, so we'd better look for the ruins of that African

Troy, in search of the ancient reservoirs."

"How far from the shore were the quarters?" asked Charley.

"I don't remember, if I ever knew; but why?"

"Well, it seems to me this island has grown up somewhat as the hair on your head does, in a shock. The large trees, as nearly as I can make out, think six feet or so to be a proper interval between themselves, and the small trees have disposed themselves to the best of their ability between the big ones; then all kinds of vines have grown up among the big and little trees, as if to make a sort of shrimp-net of the woods, and cane has grown up just to occupy any vacant spaces that might be left. It occurs to me that if we're to hunt anywhere except along shore for the old quarters, we'd best make up our minds to clear the island as we go."

"I say, Charley," said Jack, "if you were obliged to clear an acre of this growth with your own hands what would you do first?"

"I'd get a good axe, a grubbing hoe, some matches, and kindling wood; then I'd take a good look at the thicket; and then I'd take a long, long rest."

"Yes, I suppose you'd need it. But that isn't what I meant. Never mind that, however. Ned, I don't see why this isn't as good a place as any for our camp. There's a sort of bluff here, and we can clear away a place for our hut and get the hut built with less labor than it would take to find traces of negro quarters that were destroyed twelve or fifteen years ago."

"Yes, but how about water?"

"Well, I don't think it likely that we'd find any visible remains of a well in the other place, and if we did we'd have to dig it all out again. Why not dig here?"

After some discussion, and the examination of the shore for a short distance in each direction, this suggestion was adopted. The building of a shelter was easy work. It was necessary only to erect a framework of poles, to cut bushes and place them against the sides for walls, and to cover the whole with palmeto leaves – that is to say, with the leaves of a species of dwarf palm which grows in that region in abundance. These leaves are known to persons at the North only in the form of palm-leaf fans. On the coast of South Carolina they grow in all the swamps and woodlands.

A little labor made a bunk for the boys to sleep upon, and while Ned and Charley filled it with long gray Spanish moss, Jack got dinner ready, first rowing out from shore and catching fish enough for that meal while his companions finished the house.

"Now," said Jack, when dinner was over and the boys had stretched themselves out for a rest, "it's nearly sunset, and we're all tired. We've got the best part of two kegs of water left, so I move that we don't begin digging our well till morning."

"Agreed," said the other boys, glad enough to be idle.

"Now, I've got something I want you to tell me about," said Jack. "Two things, in fact." With that, he went to the boat and looked about. Presently he came back and said:

"One of 'em's dried up. Here's the other."

He handed Ned a queer-looking fish, almost black, about

eight inches long, very slender, and very singularly shaped.

"See," he said; "its jaw protrudes in so queer a way that I can't make out which side of the creature is top and which bottom. Turn either side you please up, and it looks as if you ought to turn the other up instead; and then the thing has a sort of match-lighter on top of his head, or on the bottom – I don't know which it is. Look."

He pointed to the creature's head. There was a flat, oval figure there, made by a ridge in the skin, and the flat space enclosed within this oval line was crossed diagonally by other ridges, arranged with perfect regularity. The whole looked something like the figure on the opposite page.

"Now, what I want to know," said Jack, "is what sort of fish this is, which side of him belongs on top, and what use he makes of this match-lighter."

"I'm afraid I can't help you much," said Ned. "A year ago I would have told you at once that the fish is a shark's pilot, so called because he follows ships as sharks do, and the sailors think he acts as a pilot for the sharks. But now I don't know what to call it."

"Why not?" asked Charley.

"Because I don't know. I've been reading up in the cyclopædias and natural histories and ichthyologies about our fishes down here, and have found out that whatever I know isn't so."

"Why, how's that?"

"Well, take the whiting, for example. When I began reading

up to see if there was any sort of cousinship between him and the dolphin, I soon found that the whiting isn't a whiting at all, but I couldn't find out any thing else about him. The whiting described in the books is a sort of codfish's cousin, and he lives only at the North. Neither the pictures nor the descriptions of him at all resemble our whiting, so I don't know what sort of fish our whiting is. I only know that he isn't a whiting, and isn't the remotest relation to the dolphin, because he is a fish and has scales, while the dolphin is a cetacean."

"What's a cetacean?" asked Charley.

"A vertebrated, mammiferous marine animal."

"Well; go on; English all that."

"Well, whales, dolphins narwhals, and porpoises are the principal cetaceans. They are not fish, but marine animals, and they suckle their young."

"Well, that's news to me," said Charley.

"Now, then," said Jack, "if you two have finished your little side discussion, suppose we come back to the subject in hand. What do you know, Ned, about this fish that I have in my hand, and why don't you call him a shark's pilot now, as you say you did a year ago?"

"Why, because the books treat me the same way in his case that they do in the whiting's. They describe a shark's pilot which is as different from this as a whale is from a heifer calf, and so I don't know what to call this fellow. Did he make a fight when you caught him?"

"Indeed he did. I was sure I had a twenty-pound something or other on my hook, and when I pulled up this insignificant little creature, with the match box on his head, I was disgusted. I looked at him to see if he hadn't a steam-engine somewhere about him, because he pulled so hard, and that's what made me observe his match box and his curious up-side-down-iteness."

"I say, Ned," said Charley, "why is it that our Southern fishes are so neglected in the books?"

"Well, I've asked myself that question, and the only answer I can think of is this: in the first place, there is no great commercial interest in fishing here as there is at the North; and then the natural history books and the cyclopædias are all written at the North or in Europe, and so there are thousands of curious fish down here which are not mentioned. There's the pin-cushion fish, for example. I can't find a trace of that curious creature in any of the books."

"What sort of thing is a pin-cushion fish?" asked Jack.

"He's simply a hollow sphere, a globular bag about twice the size of a walnut, and as round as a base ball."

"Half transparent, is he? Red, shaded off into white? with water inside of him, and pimples, like pin-heads, all over him, and eyes and mouth right on his fair rotundity, making him look like a picture of the full moon made into a human face?" asked Jack eagerly.

"Yes, that's the pin-cushion fish."

"I thought so. That's my other one," said Jack.

"What do you mean?" asked Ned.

"Why, that's the other thing I had to show you, but couldn't find. I caught him with the cast net."

"And kept him to show to me?" asked Ned.

"Yes, but he disappeared."

"Of course he did. He spat himself away."

"How's that?"

"Why, if you take a pin-cushion fish out of the water, and put him down on a board, he'll sit there looking like a judge for a little while; then he'll begin to spit, and when he spits all the water out, there's nothing left of him except a small lump of jelly. They're very curious things. I wish we had a good popular book about our Southern fishes and the curious things that live in the water here on the coast."

"Don't you suppose these things are represented at all in scientific books?" asked Jack.

"I suppose that many of them are, but many of them are not, and those that are described, are described by names that we know nothing about, and so only a naturalist could find the descriptions or recognize them when found. With all Northern fishes that are familiarly known, the case is different. If a Northern boy wants to find out more than he knows already about a codfish, he looks for the information under the familiar name 'Codfish,' and finds it there. He does not need to know in advance that the cod is a fish of the *Gadus* family, and the *Morrhua vulgaris* species. So, when he wants to know about the

whiting that he is familiar with, he finds the information under the name whiting; but the scientific men who wrote the books, however much they may know about the fish that we call whiting, do not know, I suppose, that it is anywhere called whiting, and so they don't put the information about it under that head. They only come down South as far as New Jersey, and tell about a species of fish which is there called whiting, though it isn't the real whiting. If they had known that still another and a very different fish goes by that name down here, they would have told us about that too, in the same way."

"What's the remedy?" asked Charley.

"For you, or Jack, or me," answered Ned, "to study science, and to make a specialty of our Southern fishes. When we do that and give the world all the information we can get by really intelligent observation, all the scientific writers will welcome the addition made to the general store of knowledge. That is the way it has all been found out."

"Why can't we begin now?"

"Because we haven't learned how to observe. We don't know enough of general principles to be able to understand what we see. Let's form habits of observation, and let's study science systematically; after that we can observe intelligently, and make a real contribution to knowledge."

"You're not going to write your book on the Marine Fauna of the Southern States to-night, are you?" asked Jack.

"No, certainly not," said Ned, with a laugh at his own

enthusiasm.

"Then let's go to bed; I'm sleepy," said Jack.

CHAPTER VII

AN ENEMY IN THE CAMP

The three tired boys went to sleep easily enough, and the snoring inside their hut gave fair promise of a late waking the next day. But before long Jack became restless in his sleep, and began to toss about a good deal. Charley seemed to catch his restlessness, and presently he sat up in the bunk and began to slap himself. This thoroughly aroused him, and as Jack and Ned were tossing about uneasily he had no scruple in speaking to them.

"I say, fellows, we're attacked."

"What's the matter?" muttered Ned, at the same time beginning to rub himself vigorously, first on one part of the body, then on another.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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