

CHAPTER X.

CAPTAIN BOWERS—KEY WEST—THE CONCHS



THE scene which was enacted after the occurrence of the terrible event detailed in the last two chapters, gave me some insight into the character of Captain Bowers. Chary of speech with regard to his feelings, he was nevertheless imbued with deep religious sentiment.

Although a strict disciplinarian on his vessel, he was always kind to the men, and ever ready to afford them any pleasure that was reasonable. In all my subsequent intercourse with him, I found him to be most considerate to every one with whom he came in contact.

To me, immediately after the event at the Marquesas, he was particularly kind; and I ascribed his conduct to his belief that a young boy must have been terribly shocked by such an occurrence. In the course of two or three days, he gradually resumed his old manner;

and this confirmed me in my previous belief that he did not consider it good for the discipline of the vessel to be seen in familiar intercourse with a person, who, of necessity, was obliged, in most things, to be one of the crew.

We reached Key West without any incident worth recording, and as soon as we had made fast to our wharf, the captain gave me leave to go ashore, and provide myself with the clothes of which I stood in so great need. These I readily found. They were goods made in New York. I soon disposed of my slender stock of cash, but that did not disturb me, for I had obtained all the clothes which I required, and of money for other purposes, I had no need, having no other wants.

The town of Key West is situated on the northern part of the western end of an island which bears the same name. The island is situated a little north of latitude $24^{\circ} 30'$, and a little west of longitude $81^{\circ} 40'$ west from Greenwich. It is between four and five miles in length, and, at the broadest part, is not quite a mile in width. It has an elevation of only a few feet above the sea. Once, when a terrible hurricane prevailed there, the water of the ocean was so heaped up on the coast, by the violence of the wind, that a large portion of Key West was submerged, and the inhabitants

were compelled to seek refuge on the highest ground, which is about the middle of the island

The town of Key West was well laid out, and contained some very desirable dwellings. The houses were generally provided with verandahs, similar to those which are usually found in tropical countries. The chief business of the town consisted in fitting out and supplying the wreckers, and all the people were devoted to nothing else: if, perhaps, we except a few travelers, who came for health, and sometimes left their bones. Every thing revolved about that business; and every one was an owner of a wrecker, or a captain of one, or a mate of one, or a sailor on one, or some female relation of these.

Very little food was grown upon the island. Back of the town, there were a few patches of land under cultivation, but they could not supply more than a very limited amount of food. Groceries came from New York; fruit from Havana; beef from the main-land of Florida. Fish and turtle abound on the Reef, whence Key West receives a surfeit. The most remarkable edifices in Key West were the latten towers — tall, airy-looking structures of wood, from whose dizzy heights the Reef could be seen for miles. Cocoanut trees grew luxuriantly in the gardens, and limes were found in plenty.

Back of the town, and separated from it only by a narrow intervening space of open ground, the mangrove woods commenced, and covered nearly all the Key, although, in places, the growth was either diminutive or sparse. And now you have a picture of Key West.

The Conchs, of whom incidental mention has already been made, inhabit one portion of the island. Their quarter is called Conchtown. They were originally Bahamans, who settled in Key West, and pursued wrecking for a livelihood. Whether a man is a native Bahaman, resident in Key West, or whether he is born in Key West, seems to make no difference: he is known as a Conch.

The name of Conch is taken from that of the large shell-fish which are found in great numbers in the waters of the Gulf. It is said to be applied to the Bahamans of Key West, because the popular belief, or pretence, is that they subsist principally upon the food of these shell-fish. A Conch, it is asserted, can dive to the bottom of the ocean, where the water is not more than twelve fathoms in depth, and there crack and eat one of his namesakes for breakfast.

However true that may be, and I leave you to judge of the probability for yourselves, I am unable to certify or deny it from my own perso-

nal experience. In the case of any other people, we might decide at once that they could not live long enough under water to make the shortest repast; but it so happens that the Conchs are most expert divers, and rules which apply to most men, do not apply to them.

To people generally, the following will appear within bounds. It was at least vouched for by many residents of Key West. A gentleman, on a fishing party to the Reef became sea-sick, and lost his false teeth overboard. One of the party noted some bearings of the land, and when they returned to Key West, a Conch engaged to find the teeth and restore them to their owner, in which extraordinary undertaking he succeeded.

It must not be inferred from the circumstance that the Conchs exclusively inhabit a particular quarter in the town of Key West, or from their having acquired the reputation of being skilful divers and wreckers, that they never occupy stations above the grade of common sailors. Many captains, mates, and owners of wreckers, come from these people. However, the majority, as elsewhere, are comprised in the class of ordinary seamen; and these, doubtless owing much to the fish diet upon which they chiefly

subsist, are easily recognizable by their appearance and carriage.

They are a long, lanky, and sallow race, tough and wiry, and capable of much endurance in the region where they are acclimated.