

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN TUFT AND HIS FRIENDS—THE EXCURSION TO SAND KEY—CAPTAIN TUFT'S COOK, SOL—REFLECTIONS ON THE WONDERS OF THE REEF—THE RETURN TO KEY WEST.



WHILE Captain Bowers was waiting for the schooner's cargo of sugar to be unladen, and was receiving the stores which were to last during her cruise on the wrecking station for which she was bound, he had no need of my attendance, as he lived with his family in Key West.

The leisure which thus fell to my lot, enabled me to make a very pleasant excursion to Sand Key, which is about eight miles to the south of Key West, and the southernmost possession of the United States. It contains an area of a couple of hundred square yards. Its surface is barely above the level of the ocean, and it does not possess a single blade of any sort of vegeta-

tion. At the time of which I speak, it presented much the same appearance that it exhibits now, except that since then the United States Government has built there a huge light-house of iron, supported on piles of the same material. Some years before the erection of this light-house, another structure, for the same purpose had been swept away by the hurricane already mentioned, which well-nigh destroyed the whole island.

The opportunity of making this trip to Sand Key was afforded me by a Captain Tuft, the captain of a wrecker which was fitting out at the wharf where our schooner lay. Captain Bowers had happened to mention my story to him, and this seemed to interest him in me; for one morning when paying a visit to Captain Bowers, he mentioned his intention of going to Sand Key, on the following day, and asked permission to take me with the party.

The next day, about an hour after daylight, we started in a good stout sail-boat, twenty-two feet in length, decked over the bow, and provided with washboards.

She was a staunch little craft, and, for her size, carried an immense spread of canvas. Her sail, however, did not prove too much for her, although she heeled over, and every thing strained and cracked, and her mast bent as if it

would go by the board. In an hour and ten minutes from the time of our departure from Key West, we landed on Sand Key. Captain Tuft, before starting, had not communicated to me the purpose of his visiting that place; but while we were sailing there, I learned from the conversation of the party, consisting of six persons in all, that the excursion was made for the purpose of having a feast on a certain fish, called sand-fish, which frequent the coast of Florida, and are found in large numbers in the waters around Sand Key. The captain had brought the cook of his vessel with him, and had provided himself with all the appliances necessary for preparing the fish, not forgetting those accessories in the way of bread, butter, pickles, and condiments of all sorts, with which such parties are generally provided. I found that I had fallen in with a party of *bons vivants*, who had come down to regale themselves in epicurean style.

We had scarcely beached the boat, before the black cook, Sol, was out with his cast-net, and making a straight line for the seaward side of the Key, where he thought that he perceived signs of fish. As this was the part of the day's diversion which pleased me most, I picked up the fish-basket, and quickly followed him. The main body of the Key was quite smooth and

sandy, but, on the outside, the shore was broken up, by the action of the sea, into boulders of coral rock, scattered so profusely, that, by the exercise of a little agility, Sol and I leaped from fragment to fragment, and thus avoided going into the water. In the pools formed by the absence of fragments in some places, whole schools of sand-fish flashed around, and darted in and out through the numerous openings to the sea.

"Whist!" suddenly ejaculated Sol, and with that, he crouched low, and throwing his net over his arm, crept cautiously towards one of the pools. In an instant more, the net had left his hand and fallen fairly in the midst of a school of fish.

Just as I said that the net fell fairly in the midst of the fish, it suggested itself to me that you may not know how a casting-net is made, and that it were well if I here describe it, as you cannot otherwise conceive how, by throwing a net on top of fish, they can be entrapped. The seine, the scoop-net, and the casting-net, are all constructed upon different principles. The scoop-net captures fish by being raised from below; the casting-net by falling from above; and the seine acts by the intermediate process, and merely encircles the fish, whereupon they can be hauled ashore.

The casting-net is circular in form, and about three yards in diameter. For the purpose of keeping its edge close to the bottom of the water, little pellets of lead are placed around it at equal distances. A strong cord is attached to the centre of the net, and in throwing the net, the end of the cord is passed around the left wrist. The mass of the net is then supported in a heap on the left arm, while it is spread across between the left and right arm, the latter of which supports and encircles it around its curve. This partial spread of the net, is what enables the caster to throw it so that it will open fully. If he held it otherwise, it would fall in a lump; but he extends one portion in its destined position, and suddenly launching that out into the air, the mass of net held on the left arm follows it, and the whole assumes a horizontal position, and falls flat on the surface of the water.

When Sol cast his net, there ensued such a thrashing and splashing and darting and leaping of fish, that it seemed to me that he must have missed his aim, and I intimated as much when I saw him deliberately hauling the net towards the rock on which he was stationed.

“No, sah,” chuckled Sol, “dis niggah hab cotch too many fish. Dey nose him by dis time, and dey nebber tries to get away.”

"How about those that left in so great a hurry, Sol?" said I.

"Yah, yah; you see dey was disapp'inted bekase dey could n't get in, and dey lef sudden. De fish on dis Reef knows dat it's not ebery cook can do 'em up so brown as old Sol, so dere's gin'rally a rush to have the honor of me cookin' 'em."

There had certainly been a rush on this occasion, for as Sol slowly and carefully hauled his net to the rock on which he stood, I could see that it was alive with pan-fish from five to six inches in length. We carefully carried it to the sandy ground back of the coral boulders, and there disengaged its glistening burden.

While I was putting the fish into the basket, Sol made off in a new direction, and by the time I had finished, I saw the net swing out again, and fall into one of the neighboring pools. Carefully hauling in the cord, Sol gathered up the net, and approaching me, deposited on the sand a still bigger catch than his first one.

"I reckon we'se got enough to commence on," said Sol, as I heaped the basket nearly to the top.

"To commence on! Why Sol, there's enough for a ship's company!"

"Dey's ekal to *two* ships' companies any day, —the captain and his friends. I've fished for

dem genelmen afore, sah,—yes, sah, dey's powerful feeders on small fry. It'll do to commence on. I'll tote de net, it'll wet you,—you tote de basket, will you, sah?"

We returned to the other end of the Key, where, by this time, the captain and his five friends had built a fire in a portable stove, and had put up a shelter of canvas supported by four poles thrust into the ground. Under the shade of this awning, the captain and his friends appeared to be making themselves very comfortable with a bottle of light wine and some biscuit. Some such arrangement as the awning was very desirable, for although, in this region, the temperature in the shade never rises above 96° Fahrenheit, the heat in the sun is excessive, and the glare from the white coral sand intense. Under shelter, the sea-breeze, which rarely ceases to blow, renders the ordinary temperature delightful.

"Hurry up, Sol!" exclaimed Captain Tuft, "the sail from Key West has given us all ravenous appetites. I did n't touch a morsel for breakfast, just to save myself up for this treat. I drank a cup of coffee, that's all."

Sol was at that very moment hurrying up, being engaged, with the Gulf for a basin, in cleaning and preparing the fish for the table, or rather, the ground spread with a few napkins.

Securing my services, we soon had a couple of dozen fish seething and sputtering in the frying-pan. This certainly could not have been more than a quarter of an hour from the time when they were caught.

Sol was right about the quality of the captain and his friends as trencher-men. It is true that none of them had had breakfast; all, like the captain, having avoided eating any thing before leaving Key West, for the sake of the breakfast which awaited them at Sand Key. The fish were small, too; but then (indisputable fact) the basket had been nearly full, and no fish were left for me and Sol. Sol soon got over that difficulty, and in five minutes had caught another mess of fish, from which we selected the finest, and let the rest go, at which I wickedly informed Sol that they must be very much "disappointed."

I found the sand-fish delicious. The bones are so delicate, that although one might wish them smaller, they are not large enough for one to think of picking them out. The most agreeable method of eating these fish is by removing the head, taking the tail between the fingers, and conveying the fish to the mouth without the aid of knife or fork.

By the time I had finished my breakfast, to which Sol added his society, by standing and

munching near the place where I sat in the bow of the boat, the captain and his friends were well under way in sea stories and segars. Sol had commenced to wash up the crockery, and I, having nothing to engage my attention, wandered back to the coral boulders from which Sol had cast his net.

Some of them lay so closely together, that I could sit on one, and place my heels on two others. As I sat in this position, I gradually came to notice all sorts of little creeping things and fishes and marine plants, which, from their diminutive size, had not at first attracted my attention. I got down on my hands and knees, and then lay prone on my face, and examined the water between the boulders. It was swarming with life of every variety. One little fish particularly engaged my attention. It was very small, not more than two inches long, and its minuteness was probably the cause of its not being alarmed at my proximity. In comparison with it, I was probably so gigantic, that it did not even realize my presence. Its color was the most beautiful mazarine blue, when it paddled into the shadows, and when it emerged into the light, it took a cerulean tint. On the Reef, these fish are called blue-fish, and they grow much larger, being, when full grown,

several inches in length. They never attain a large size.

I lay for a long time watching this fish, and the other living things that, in great numbers, occupied every little shallow; and then I sat up, and looked along the stretch of Keys and Reefs, and thought how strange was this multiform and myriad life, how wonderful this coral which built solid walls of rock from the waters of the sea, and ceaselessly and harmoniously followed out the Divine Thought, in obedience to the Divine Will.

"Fred! Fred!" I suddenly heard the voice of the captain shout, "All aboard, now; we're off for Key West!"

The wind was abeam, and in a little more than the time taken by our first trip, we reached Key West. After thanking the captain for his kindness, I went aboard of the *Flying Cloud*, which was deserted by the men, some of whom were looking on, while the others were engaged in helping to land wild cattle from a neighboring schooner, just arrived from the main-land of Florida.