

## CHAPTER XV.

HOW THE OCCUPATION OF WRECKING IS PURSUED—OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHARACTER OF THE WRECKERS.



BETWEEN the Reef and Keys the wreckers lie securely at anchor, stationed near enough to one another to enable them, by sailing a few miles in each direction, to survey the whole extent of the Reef. In case of necessity, as soon as they sight each other, they communicate by signals. Imagine this long stretch of Reef with its wreckers stationed at regular intervals along its course. There they lie, ever ready, at a moment's notice, to sail at a signal of distress. Not more speedily do the buzzards, from their aërial heights, descry the distant prey and grow from nothing to specks, and then to distinct birds winging their flight from every quarter, than the fast wreckers spread their canvas wings, and flock

towards the vessel of the stranded mariner. But the purpose that actuates them is very different. One comes to quench, if need be, a lingering spark of life, but the other comes to save and restore.

It is a very common, and, at the same time, erroneous belief, that the wrecker is one, who, on occasions, does not scruple to show false lights to lure the unwary navigator to destruction, and who, under pretence of saving property and life, is ever ready to resort to pillage and personal violence to secure possession of merchandise. This idea comes entirely from the knowledge which every one possesses, that, in wrecking, what is the loss of one man is the gain of another. But so it is, in greater or less degree, in all the transactions of life. It is evident, that if this notion about the wreckers is correct, the same influence must corrupt nearly all mankind, and especially it would not be safe to live with lawyers and physicians, for fear of being drugged, or constantly set by the ears. In all my intercourse with wreckers, I found them to be men, much like others of their species; and if there was any thing objectionable in their mode of life, it was in a particular injurious to themselves, and about which you will learn when I come to the history of our daily life.

Wrecking, according to a system like that established in Florida, by law, should not be confounded with the coast piracy, which, in old times, often existed in what were called civilized countries, and which still exists along barbarous coasts. There was a time, when, even in civilized countries, the wreck was considered the lawful property of the king of the country where it was cast away. Then there was little mercy for the property or lives of the shipwrecked, except that which the *salvors* chose to extend. But in Florida, now, whatever wrecking there may once have been, when the island of Key West was a favorite resort of smugglers and pirates, the business is as regularly conducted as any occupation in which seamen are engaged. The wrecking vessels are there to give aid, but if a captain chooses to refuse it, even if he needs it, he can use his own pleasure. When, however, he puts his vessel and cargo in charge of any one of the vessels that come to his rescue, the captain of the latter becomes responsible for all further proceedings, and takes full command, and employs others to aid him, or not, as he judges fit. When the stranded vessel, or the merchandise, or both, are saved, the amount due to the salvor is awarded by the Judge of an Admiralty Court. The sum adjudged to be

due to the wreckers, in proportion to the loss which they have averted, is termed the salvage. If, now-a-days, there is any thing nefarious about wrecking, it is generally on the side of the wrecked. Many a vessel, for the sake of obtaining the money for which it was insured, has been intentionally driven on the Reef, during a night of quiet weather, when there was no danger of her going to pieces.

The wrecking vessels being strung at intervals along the Reef, between it and the Keys, every now and then we passed close to one and received a hail and inquiry whether we had brought any mail for her from Key West. But we had none, except for a vessel which we expected to find near to the station for which we were bound; so after shaking the schooner up in the wind, for a minute or two, so as to give the captains a chance to have a short talk, we kept away on our course.

We sailed along most prosperously until about dark, when we came to anchor just off Indian Key, on which there were a number of houses. The captain went ashore to visit some one, but as he did not order me to accompany him, I had no opportunity of seeing more than the general appearance of the Key, on which I could plainly distinguish the houses of the settlement.