CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ANCHORAGE AT CAPE FLORIDA—FRED RANSOM AND GEORGE BOWERS—WHAT THEY DID, AND WHAT THEY SAW, AFTER THEY WERE PUT IN COMMAND OF A DINGY.

EARLY in the afternoon of the next day, we came to anchor off Cape Florida. The Cape, as the reader will remember from my description of the Reef, is the southern end of Key Biscayne, north of which is Virginia Key, and north of that, the southernmost point of the Atlantic shore of the main-land of Florida.

On the main-land, in a north-westerly direction from Virginia Key and Key Biscayne, is Miami River, a small stream that effects part of the drainage of the Everglades of Florida.

On the western side of the southern point of Key Biscayne, the water is bold up to the very beach, and affords a secure anchorage, from

which the Reef and Key Biscayne Bay can both be seen.

It was here that we let go our anchor, in this snug little harbor, from which, looking towards the eastward over the low point of Cape Florida, we could see a portion of our cruising ground, and, looking to the westward, command a long stretch of the main-land. On the point of Cape Florida was a tall light-house, of the old-fashioned conical form. Except its keeper, and a few soldiers in a military post at the mouth of the Miami, not a soul inhabited the region, save the Indians lurking in the forest on the distant main-land.

On a calm morning, rowing gently along the margin of the Keys or Reef, gathering shells, sponges, anemones; then spreading sail to drop the killick of our dingy on some fishing-ground, where the fish never nibbled, but seized the bait; then, spreading sail again to seek some distant spot, where the marsh-hen, with quickly-throbbing note, sought cover, but found no protection from our eager guns,—these were our sports, these the pleasures of which we never seemed to tire.

One of the prettiest sights to be seen in the inner bay was the fish-hawk mounting on high and soaring in wide circles, until some tempting prize made it close its wings and descend like

the thunder-bolt. Then came the splash, the brief struggle, the fierce bird mounting on sluggish wing, bearing in its deadly clutch the struggling fish, which gleamed and glittered like polished silver.

Of all the birds that we saw, the most graceful in outline was the frigate bird, or man-of-war hawk, as it is called on the Reef. Its tail is remarkably long and forked, and its wings, capable of great extension, taper to the finest points. The bird can be recognized by its shape, almost at the greatest distance at which it can be seen. It soars at a great height, and one may watch in vain to detect the slightest movement of the wings. It ascends and descends in graceful spiral flight, in which it seems as if moved up and down on gentle currents in the air.

One day we had the great good-fortune to find the shell of a paper-nautilus. This light, graceful object, with its high curving prow, really looks so much like what one might fancy in a fairy gondola, that it is no wonder it was fabled to rise from the ocean-bottom, spread tiny sails, and waft across the bosom of the deep. But, alas! the fable is gone, and we now know that the nautilus *crawls* on the bottom of the sea, *with its shell on its back.* The argonaut is the true name of the paper-nautilus.

It possesses an exceedingly white and fragile shell. When inhabited by the animal, the shell is elastic.

The pearly-nautilus belongs to another order of mollusks, and is the only remaining representative of several extinct species of animals. The pearly-nautilus is the one of which Dr. Holmes wrote the beautiful verses, commencing,

"This is the ship of pearl which poets feign
Sails the unshadowed main——
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer winds its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the siren sings
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair."

The Portuguese man-of-war sails in little fleets about the waters of the Reef, and we often passed through hundreds of them merrily dancing over the waves. They are filmy little boats, like pods of glossy violet silk; and on one side they at pleasure raise or furl their delicate lug-sails which speed them on their way, while below, hang numerous filaments that stream astern like tiny cables. It is often supposed that the boat is the animal itself, and these cables only so many appendages, to serve as rudders to keep the sail braced against the wind. The streaming cables do serve that purpose, but they form a whole community of

beings that use the little boat to tow them through the sea. Thus, you observe, that if any thing is subordinate, where every thing is mutually dependent, it is the boat, and not the crew who float astern.

Sometimes we rowed our boat through a little inlet, so narrow that the oar-tips scarcely cleared the foliage on the banks, and, with a few strokes, darted into the waters of a placid lake studded with green islets. We found many Keys like this. From the outside, they seemed a dense growth of trees extending from shore to shore; but they were really nothing but a rim of land encircling waters which ebbed and flowed through obscure inlets. These places always had great charm for me. Coming from the seaward side of a Key, where the breeze drove on the restless, chafing sea, which frets at every barrier, day and night, and never ceases its hollow murmuring or thunderous crash upon the shore,—we could come with one swift glide into waters unruffled by a ripple; where there was not a sound, save the scream of a wild bird; where the brilliant flamingoes stood in gorgeous troops, and the solitary heron watched moodily beside the bank.