

KEY WEST AND THE CONCHS

SOME ODDITIES OF OUR SOUTHERNMOST CITY.

DELUSIVE CUBAN SHOES—A SHIFTING SCALE OF PRICES—DRIVING OVER MILES OF ROCK—A MODEL HACKMAN.

KEY WEST, March 15. — There is no breeze here—not the ghost of one. I have been sitting for half an hour on the third-story veranda of the Russell House, shifting my chair from one angle with the corner to another, in the hope of catching a breath or two of a zephyr that does not exist. All this time I have been mopping and mopping, being in such a state of moisture that I begin to fear I am a cake of ice and am melting. I say nothing, you will please observe, about a previous hour spent inside the house, in my room, vainly trying to make up my mind how to begin this letter, and fighting mosquitoes and fanning myself with a whisk-broom. At last I am forced to own that there is no air stirring; that it is too hot for endurance, and that there are so many curious things to write about Key West I see no way of starting but just to prepare for a dive and take a "header" into the midst of them. The very flags, hanging dead from the tops of their staffs, laugh at me when I try to write. If there is, at this hour of the day, any living creature stirring in any street of Key West, it is a Cuban on his way to the nearest saloon after a glass of iced claret. The sea (which I can overlook for a space of many miles from my high seat) is as smooth as glass. I light another cigarette, (made in Key West, with a Havana label,) and in the smoke that is too indolent to blow away I see the outline of my letter. It lingers on the veranda, this smoke, in a lazy way, and in its midst I see a phantom procession, an island Mardi-gras of smoke. Here is a grove of palm trees at the head. Then a broken heap of dark gray rocks, scattered over rough fields. A rare lot of Cubans, all mounted on high-heeled shoes, all wearing good, but frightfully unfashionable, clothes. A tall Custom-house. A Post Office perpetually haunted by whites, blacks, and yellows, inquiring in many strange tongues for letters that never come. Some miles of houses, mostly small, but all with yards and trees and flowers. A boy, a genuine "Conch" boy, driving a carriage, and telling me more about Key West, surely, than ever driver told a stranger before. After a stay of four or five days in Key West these things, it seems, were more firmly impressed than any others upon my mind.

As the steamer Cochran drew up to her wharf at Key West we saw a small unpaved inclosure, in which were gathered, perhaps, a hundred whites and blacks, and three or four carriages. When we landed in this inclosure we were at once taken in hand by the hackmen; but the sign of the Russell House, the only hotel in Key West, stood out too prominently, and we knew it was within walking distance. In common with two or three of the other passengers I fell into the hands of a boy hackman of about 18, who was determined to do something for us, if it was only to carry up our satchels. He was so clever in pointing out the way for us to walk to the Post Office, and in giving us such other little information as we wanted, that we laughingly assented when he said, on leaving us:

"Now, mind, you belong to me when you want to go out riding. I'll be 'round to the hotel to see you."

He was "a genuine Conch," he told us; by which he meant a native of Key West. The natives of the Florida Keys, as well as of most of the Bahama Islands, are known all over the Southern country as Conchs, just as we speak of Florida crackers. It is a name usually applied in derision, but the Conchs themselves do not seem at all ashamed of it. The easiest definition I can find for the term is the meaning that they are picked up loose along the beach, like conchs. This particular specimen, I suspect, had a little Irish blood inside his shell, for he was a fluent talker, polite, notwithstanding the forwardness necessary in a hack driver, and had a frank, open face that made us take a liking to him. It will readily be believed that there was something in him beyond the ordinary cabman when his three New-Yorkers let him take us into his confidence and mark us for his own. And lucky we were that we let him appoint himself our guide, philosopher, and friend, for he subsequently showed us Key West thoroughly, was always ready when we wanted him, and always treated us honestly. This little tribute to a young hackman is pleasant to write, because such things are so very rare.

We hardly set foot on shore before we began to wilt. Out on the water there is always something of a breeze, but there was none on the land, and the heat took right hold of us and made us feel like strips of brown paper dipped in water. We dragged ourselves around two or three corners of the Post Office, and found it a box about 10 feet square, with a set of letter-boxes that must have been made in the last century, and the dirty little room crowded with negroes, Cubans, and Conchs. No matter for the crowd or the filth, though, for we got our letters, which made us feel several hundred miles nearer home. When we learned that there is a telegraph office here, with direct communication to New-York, we felt no further away than High Bridge. The streets we went through, we noticed, were narrow, but hard and smooth and clean, and walking was easier and more comfortable in the roadway than on the sidewalks. So we took the middle of the street for it and marched up to the Russell House with great élan, for the entire town seemed to be out on the sidewalks to look at us. I mean the entire city. When a State has only two or three small cities, like Florida, it would be mean to rob any of them of their title. Although Key West has a population of 10,000 or 12,000 the people "spot" a stranger in an instant, and each native gives him a critical examination. We found the Russell House so nearly full that only one or two vacant rooms were left, and it required some engineering on the part of the landlord to find room for us all. There was a big room on the third floor that would hold two of us, and this was assigned to Mr. Chapman and myself; but it had just been vacated, and several hours would be required to clean it and make it habitable, so meanwhile we strolled down the principal street in search of a shoe store. Long walks in Arkansas and New-Orleans and Palma Sola had left me nearly in the proverbial condition of a shoe-maker's child, and shoes fit to wear are hard things to find outside the big cities. We turned a corner, passed a Cuban restaurant and something less than 40 tobacco shops, and presently were in the store we had been directed to—a very large one, full of all sorts of goods, from laces and fancy handkerchiefs and autograph albums to boots and shoes. By the time we reached it we were as wet as if we had just been dragged out of the surf. I never felt a heat that goes through a man and breaks him up like this Key West heat. We were already clad in the thinnest clothes, but they felt as heavy as lead. No thermometer could do justice to this kind of heat, for while you may be comfortable enough with the mercury at 55, a temperature of 80, combined with some particular state of the atmosphere, may wilt you right down. That particular state of the atmosphere was here, and we wilted. They seated me in grand style on top of an empty box to try on a pair of shoes, and for some time I could do nothing but wipe my head and face with my handkerchief, and gasp for breath. Such a broiling as this makes a man utterly regardless of any consequences, and when the shoe man said:

"It's a little warm to-day!"

I had a chance to express my opinion of Key West weather. He was talkative, and I was reckless with the heat, and I'm afraid some of my replies to his questions were not strictly accurate.

"What part of the country do you hail from?" he asked.

Hail! Oh, Heavens, for a hail-storm, anything that would cool us off! but I told him "Texas."

"Quite a country, that," said he.

"Yes," said I: "quite, entirely, abso-

lutely. We have hot weather there, too, but not like this. I've seen the thermometer there 117 at 9 o'clock in the morning, but never felt it like this. I ride under the broiling sun all day, taking care of 2,300 head of cattle, but it never affects me."

"Possible!" said he, and he brought out a pair of shoes, or I don't know what crazy yarns the heat might have driven me to tell him. He produced some of the most impossible shoes ever made for human feet, made me put them on, said they were exact fits, when they were squeezing the very marrow out of me, and, at last, talked me into buying a pair of ghosts of shoes made for the Cuban trade.

"If you want something substantial and handsome, something fine, that will wear a year without a break, try these," said he.

He could have talked me into anything in the imbecile condition the heat had reduced me to, and in my helplessness I bought a pair of Cuban shoes. Let my sad fate be a warning to all men who think of wearing Cuban shoes. They are very soft and fine and light. They have heels full two inches high that are not much bigger on the bottom than a silver quarter, and that slant forward toward the toe so that the heel is under the instep when you walk; they run almost to a point at the toes; they are narrow beyond belief; they are uncomfortable past conception. They look pretty, but they are traps. I have already fallen down two flights of stairs with them; and when I cross the street, and am 10 feet past the gutter, I hear something strike against the curbstone, and find my high heel has caught against it, and tumble over. I felt my way about the streets with them for two days, like a man walking a tight-rope, and last night I threw them at two dogs that were fighting on a tin roof far below my window, and I hope some Cuban will find them and wear them, and break his neck with them.

When we returned to the hotel we were shown to our room, which was large and had four big windows and a door opening upon the veranda, and from the veranda a picture far beyond my poor power to describe. With two of the columns of the veranda, and its roof and floor, making a large, square frame, I see this picture: In the foreground a quarter of a mile of roofs of houses, with some stray bits of yellow-painted wall, and an occasional well between the closely-built houses, out of which are growing the tops of palm trees, Cuban pines, and tall flowering plants; at the edge of the line of roofs a larger building than the rest, which is, I believe, the Custom-house, and by its side a tall, light wooden tower, looming up in the air fifty, eighty, perhaps a hundred feet, and from the top of it watchmen scan the sea for approaching vessels and give warning with a big bell; beyond this, and occupying all the upper part of the picture, the background, a streak of clearest, brightest, most lovely blue. This is the ocean. A steam-ship is moving slowly across the strip of blue; and on the summit of the tower is a man, hardly bigger than an exclamation point, watching her through a telescope. How tame it is to describe such a scene on paper, and how beautiful it is to look at. I don't enthuse very much on views, but this one carries me away. It is so bright, so blue, and looks so cool.

"What are they charging you a day?" Mr. Chapman asked me.

"I don't know," I replied, "I didn't ask."

"Well, you'd better ask," said he, "or they'll charge you \$3 50 a day. Tell them you're a commercial man and they'll charge you \$2. That's what they charge me."

This set me to cogitating; it was such a good example of the "special rates to commercial travelers." Here were two men occupying the same room and having precisely the same accommodations. Neither had ever been in the place before. One, because he was a "commercial man," was to pay \$3 a day; the other, because he wasn't, must pay \$3 50 a day. "That cat wouldn't fight if I were in your place," said Mr. Chapman. So I went down and interviewed the landlord. I found a small boy in charge of the office, who called the head waiter, who summoned the porter, who went out and found the landlord in a neighboring store.

"What are your rates, Mr. Landlord?" I asked him.

"Three fifty," said he.

"What!" said I, in pretended astonishment, "to commercial men?"

He looked at me a little incredulously and asked, "Are you a commercial man?"

"Certainly," said I. (Goodness, what a big lie for a dollar and a half!)

"What line are you in?" said he.

"Paper," said I. It was my old joke, but it came in handy.

"Then we'll charge you \$2," said he, and I went up stairs again happy as a lark, "figuring" that now I could spend \$1 50 a day extra for cigars without feeling extravagant. But it would certainly have worried me for a week if I had allowed him to charge me more than he charged my room-mate.

Our coach driver had meanwhile been in to see us, had told us many little things about the city, and had arranged for three of us that between 3 and 4 o'clock we were to go out and have a drive. We had not even the trouble of thinking when our coach driver was about. He settled everything for us, told us when to be ready, announced where he intended to take us, how long we should be gone, and just what "sights" we should visit. A forward young hackman, you will say, making himself entirely too officious, and a good person to be rid of. I deny it emphatically. I never met his like in a driver's seat, and when I come to Key West again he shall drive me all over the island. At 3 o'clock, as we were sitting on the front porch trying what we knew to be "genuine Key West cigars," he drove up with a covered carriage and one horse, smiling all over, (the boy, not the horse,) and asked whether we were ready. We were, and we climbed in and started. He drove us down the main street nearest the water, the one in which I bought the Cuban shoes, past a building that some years ago was in some way connected with the army, past the Judge Somebody-or-other's big mansion, past the beautiful cocoa-nut grove we had seen from the harbor, up near the front of an immense fort, approached by a long wooden bridge. My spirits sank at sight of the fort. No doubt my companions would want to go through it, and I would be dragged along. They were already suggesting it when our driver, sensible boy that he is, settled the question for them by saying that it wasn't worth seeing, there was only one soldier there to keep it from being stolen—and quietly drove on. This was out in the suburbs, and we went across fields of rocks, some distance along a smooth beach, until we were once more in the streets. We found the roadways rough and ill-paved, or not paved at all, except in the principal streets, with rocks and holes in them that would easily wrench the wheels from a carriage or break the legs of any horse but the tough and homely Key West horses. We drove past the cigar factories, greatly to our disappointment—at least to mine. It is impossible to hear so much of these places without forming some idea of what they are like, and for some unaccountable reason I had pictured them great four and five story brick or stone buildings, with smooth walls and long rows of small square windows, like the old Libby Prison, in Richmond. But they were nothing of the sort. They are unpretending board buildings, painted generally in a sort of gray, and carry little outward sign of the large business done within. We saw as we passed them hundreds of men and boys at work, and in some of them girls, the men and boys almost invariably smoking. So many cigars or cigarettes are allowed each operative daily—a very liberal supply. This keeps them from talking, which is not allowed because a Spaniard cannot talk without gesticulating, and that interferes with the work. We went through miles and miles of streets lined on both sides with little houses, frame houses, one story high, all with yards and gardens and trees. Many shady quiet, rose-embowered places we saw, but astonishingly few really handsome ones. Cubans? Enough of them to give the place a Spanish air, and make it look like anything but an American city. Through so many of these narrow streets we went, at breakneck speed, as if the Sheriff had been after us, that they are all mixed up in my mind, and I doubt whether I could walk direct to a single place we visited. Restaurants? No end to them. Every third house seemed to be a little Spanish restaurant, with open door, sanded floor, and chairs and tables. Our young coach driver explained why it was. No Cuban matron will cook. The home is only for sitting and sleeping in; when

it is time to eat the entire family goes out to a restaurant. And a woman who will not cook, of course, will not wash; so all the clothes go out to a laundry. With its 12,000 or so of people a greater proportion are self-supporting here, I should think, than in any other American city. They all seem to work at something—men, women, and children; not very hard, but enough to supply them at least with food. This accounts for the aged appearance of the children; boys look and act like old men; little girls like matrons. Going through one of the narrow streets, we overtook two Cubans, each carrying under his arm a game cock. Cock-fighting is a favorite Key West amusement, and Sunday afternoon the favorite time. Our driver knew these Cubans, of course, as he knew everybody and everything, and he stopped and asked them to give us a little fight. They set down their "birds" and let them tear each other a few minutes for our special benefit.

"Now I'm going to show you the greatest curiosity in Key West," said the driver. "It's a striped pig."

He drove up to a little shop full of Cuban fruits and groceries, spoke to the proprietor, and guided us out into the back yard, where this great curiosity was kept. The yard was about the size of a billiard table, and there was a strange animal there that was said to be a pig. But what struck me particularly about the place was the evident care with which its owner was preparing for an outbreak of fever in his house. All the slops of a year had apparently been emptied in it, and it was slimy, filthy, and unwholesome to the last degree. Several small children were playing in the mud, with three or four pigs for company. If this is a sample of Key West sanitary matters, I should much rather be here in January than in August. Our young driver next took us to his own home, to show us some particular kind of tree he had been describing to us. It was a fine large tree, growing in a fine large yard; but I forget its name. There are so many different kinds of tropical fruits, and they all have such outlandish names, it is impossible to remember them all. I have mastered the Paw Paws, the Loquats, the Sapodillas, the Mangoes, the Cherry Moyas, and a few others, but cannot undertake to make myself a dictionary of tropical fruits. Some of them are delicious; but, to be honest about it, where there is one kind of tropical fruit that is good there are a dozen that taste like mush and water. Our driver took us over the premises, showed us a lot of pretty young bananas, and gave us a drink out of the old-fashioned well, and when his little brother came running out of the house to see us, and our young driver picked him up and hugged him and kissed him, we knew that we had not misplaced our confidence.

That evening, sitting on the front porch, I was introduced to one of the old residents, and the conversation ran naturally toward heat and mosquitoes.

"Well, Sir," said the old resident, "some people complain of mosquitoes, but they never trouble me. I have lived in my present house for four years, and when I first went there I had a canopy over the bed; but I have never had occasion to use it. No, Sir; not once in four years."

When I went to my room that night, and found a canopy over my bed, and a hundred thousand mosquitoes in the room, mad because they couldn't get inside the canopy, I was glad the canopy was there. But when I went to bed and found two hundred thousand mosquitoes underneath the canopy, all laughing at the outsiders because they couldn't get in, and all nibbling at me between laughs, I wished the canopy in Guinea. When mosquitoes make you get up at 2 o'clock in the morning and sit for an hour smoking your pipe, slapping and wishing yourself dead, it is a mild use of language to say that they are thick.

W. D.