

HOME LIFE IN KEY WEST

AN EVENING IN ONE OF THE LITTLE FRAME HOUSES.

HOW SOME OF THE CONCHS LIVE—AN OLD
SAILOR'S RESIDENCE ON SHORE—ON THE
SCHOONER EQUATOR, FOR NASSAU.

KEY WEST, March 17.—There is frequent communication between this city and Nassau, in the Bahamas, by sailing vessel, and one of my principal objects in coming here was to fall in with a vessel bound for that port and have a look at the most northerly group of the West Indies. From inquiries made in New-Orleans, I learned that schooners occasionally crossed from Fernandina, and at long intervals from Jacksonville, but that the surest and quickest way was to come to Key West, whence a schooner sailed for Nassau at least once a week and sometimes oftener. It is further, in point of time, from here to Nassau than from here to New-York. There is no possible way of reaching it from Key West but by sailing vessel, unless by the roundabout steamer trip to Havana, across Cuba by rail to Cienfuegos, and thence by steamer around the end of Cuba, and so by water to Nassau. This trip occupies five days or more; and there was a chance, a bare chance, that kind fate would send favorable winds to carry one of the schooners across in three days, the distance being 300 or 400 miles. At any rate, there was something a little out of the common rut in going in a schooner, and I had long ago decided upon taking that route. The landlord of the Russell House directed me to a shipping agency down by the wharf, and I went there and found that the schooner Equator was to sail for Nassau on Friday, that she was then lying at the wharf, and that there was plenty of room aboard. So I went immediately down to the wharf to see her, and found her everything the agents had represented her to be—a neat and clean little vessel of about 80 tons, with a cabin from which opened three state-rooms, and some very convenient corners on the quarter-deck in which to stow one's self away and smoke a pipe. Best of all, the Captain was a New-Yorker, a relative of the owner of the schooner, and he was just down here making a few trips for the benefit of his health. He told me just where in Wall-street his office was, and I had a dim recollection of going there once to interview some ship Captain or Pilot Commissioner, or something, and I asked him whether it was not "That place where there is a flight of iron steps outside, leading to the second story?"

That was the place, and we were half-way acquainted in the first minute, through our mutual acquaintance, the outside steps. I found that the cabin fare to Nassau was \$10, and that I could have my pick of the three state-rooms; so I selected one, and in a few minutes was in possession of this precious document:

.....
\$10.00. KEY WEST, — 1884.
Received from Mr. ———
the sum of Ten Dollars, for
Passage to Nassau.
W. A. ALBURY.
.....
Schooner Equator.
.....

There was something charming about the little vessel's name. If she had been called the Thomas Q. Smith, or the Alfred H. Banks, or by some such commonplace name, she would not have looked half as rakish or piratical, or otherwise engaging. But the Equator was something like, with a broad suggestion of the tropics. And she was not simply the Equator, but "The Equator of Harbor Island." If distance lends enchantment to the view, how much more does mystery? I had no idea of the existence of such a place; and if any New-York schoolboy will tell me where it is without looking on the map I will send him up a bunch of green cocoa-nuts. The first thing I learned about it, however, was that it is invariably to be called "Arbor Island," for the inhabitants of the Bahamas, it must be remembered, are principally English, and have the true British horror of the letter H, and abuse it even more than the Briton at home. The time of sailing of the Equator left me 24 hours more in Key West, which was quite enough to "do up" everything else to be seen; for, to tell the truth, after the first day or two there is not much novelty and the place becomes tiresome. I could spend a month here very comfortably, but not a week, for a month would give me time to make trips in the little sailing vessels that are constantly running out to the Dry Tortugas and to the hundreds of other Florida Keys, on many of which are beautiful gardens and plantations of pineapples and cocoa-nuts. These little islands, far away from civilization, are always interesting, for they are always new in their old fashions and always different from each other and from everything else. I tried to make excursions to some of them while here, but had not sufficient time. One of the natives to whom I applied for information on the subject replied:

"Oh, you don't want to go out there! There's no nice buildings there, nor railroads, nor anything."

I wonder whether he thought I came from New-York to Florida to see nice buildings and railroads! People have a fiendish idea that strangers must be trotted around to see the "sights" and be bored with looking at what are considered fine public buildings. There was only one thing more in Key West that I wanted to see. Coming down on the Cochran I made the acquaintance of one of the petty officers, and found him a very clever fellow. He told me that he lived in Key West, where he kept a little house, a bachelor's den, locking it up when he went to sea and living in it when he was ashore. He invited me to spend an evening with him, and I promised to do it, and after being here a few days I was glad of the engagement, for I had seen so many of the little board houses, I was curious to see what they were like inside, and how their inhabitants live. I had elaborate directions how to reach it, and that was fortunate, for the night was as dark as nights are usually made, and if they have any street lamps in Key West I have failed to find them. My friend of the steamer and the Key West residence was a middle-aged man, something of an old sailor, and he occupied a position on the ship considerably beneath what he was evidently fitted for—a position that one would hardly think warranted the keeping up of much of an establishment on land. He was a genius in more ways than one, with a taste for music and a good fiddle to play on, and with a great talent for telling interesting stories about the many countries he had traveled in. With his big pipe ablaze, and his eyes glistening with the interest he took in what he was telling, he was a rare companion on the melancholy old Cochran, and I looked forward with pleasure to meeting him on the shore.

Feeling my way carefully around several dark corners and some distance up a narrow dark street with no sign of life save here and there a Cuban restaurant or a small cigar store open, I found myself in the neighborhood he had described, but was in despair of reaching the right house in the darkness. A little way further up the street a faint light shone through a partly open door, and while I was cogitating whether I should go there and ask for further directions, there came the sound of a fiddle through the door, and I knew that was the place I sought, for the tune that was played was "Over the Garden Wall," and I recognized his hand in it at once, he had played it so often for us on the boat. So I went up and knocked at the door, and half a minute later was in the Ancient Navigator's longshore residence. The host drew out a chair for me, laid his fiddle on the table, and bade me welcome in the first Key West home I had entered. It was a small residence, this, without any pretensions; but it had an air of comfort about it, in the little room in which we sat, that can be imparted to no place better than by an old sailor. It was too dark outside for me to see what the house looked like, but, from the appearance of the interior, I knew it to be one of the hundreds of little frame houses that line all the smaller streets in Key West. The first peculiarity about it that struck my eye was the shortness of the partitions. The house was divided by board walls into several rooms, but none of these partitions reached the ceiling. Indeed, there was no ceiling for any of them to reach to. The roof was the only covering over our heads, with the rafters exposed; and the partitions were about eight feet high, leaving a large open space between them and the roof, into

which the solitary lamp on the table threw a gleam of light. The room we were in was not more than ten feet by fifteen, but it held a great quantity of goods. There was a bedstead in one corner and a washstand; in the corner nearest the door a large parlor organ; opposite this a table covered with books; several rocking-chairs, some camp-stools, matting on the floor, pictures on the walls—a perfect little nest of comfort for an old tar spending a few occasional days ashore. And the old tar was fully disposed to make the most of it. He had a rocking-chair set out for himself and one for me, pipes and smoking tobacco ready to hand on top of the organ, and fans on the table, for it was hot enough even at this time of the evening and at this season of the year.

"You'll think it's queer," said he, "for an old fellow like myself to have a house, and to keep an organ and a fiddle in it, and play them, too, and sing. Well, it is queer; but I'm a queer fellow, and never do things, so they say, like other people. I had somebody else once to play the music and make the little home pleasant, but that's past. I'm home now four nights in every month, and have to do something to pass the time, or else I'd be out among the gin mills, like the rest of the crew. So I have my quiet little time here, and keep out of mischief."

He opened a closet door and brought out a small basket of fresh oranges, and while I quenched my thirst with them he played very prettily upon the fiddle. Before long he seated himself in front of the organ and played and sang for some time. I am no judge of music, but I have rarely heard such pathetic and sympathetic singing and playing as I heard that evening. Perhaps it was the queer surroundings; perhaps the odd sight of a rough old sailor taking the part of an accomplished host and entertaining his visitor with violin and organ. After the music we played a game or two of euchre and smoked pipes, and he fell to telling stories, and spun some yarns that I hope some day to put on paper, but cannot introduce here. The whole scene made a very curious impression upon me—the queer little house in the queerest of little cities; the old sailor, and his strange way of living; the music, which rather tended toward the melancholy, and the yarns he spun with all the impressiveness of an old sailor. No wonder, I thought, that in such a curious city as this people should have such a curious way of living. When it was well along toward 11 o'clock I made a start to return to the hotel, but the host interfered with me.

"Not yet," said he. "Do not make me feel that I have let a guest go away without offering him even a glass of beer. I rarely touch it, but in this part of the world we think it a criminal offense to meet and part without a drop to keep our spirits up. I do not keep it in the house, because I have no ice; but I have had a couple of bottles of lager put on ice at the grocer's, not far away, and you must just amuse yourself with a pipe while I go and get them."

He would take no denial, and a minute later I was alone. My host went out of the front door, and he had hardly been gone 20 seconds when I was startled by a noise in another part of the house, beyond the board partitions. It sounded like the moving of some piece of furniture, and was followed immediately afterward by a slight cough. I listened and soon heard a voice that sounded like a man's, but could not catch the words, which were in Spanish. The host had said nothing about the house having other occupants, and indeed it seemed too small for anybody else to be living in it. I might have waited a minute for the old sailor to come back, and then have had the noise explained; but perhaps I was justified in the suspicion that instantly flashed across my mind that I had walked into some sort of a trap. There were some trifling grounds for it: the odd character of the place, the disappearance of its owner, leaving me alone, and the unexpected advent of a Spaniard in another part of the house. At any rate, I determined to lose no time in finding out what it meant, and picked up the lamp and started for the back part of the house, whence the sounds came. And just at that moment I felt the greatest affection for all the members of a noted firm of artisans in some New-England town, to wit, Messrs. Smith & Wesson, a fine specimen of whose handiwork I had in a convenient pocket. It may be permissible always for a traveler to carry a revolver—I think it is—but to travel through the South-west of our own country, or through any Spanish-speaking country whatever, without a pistol within easy reach, is nothing short of criminal negligence.

A door opened from the room in which we had been sitting into another front room, much larger than the first, in which I saw some chairs and a table, but no signs of any Spaniard. Crossing this room, I opened another door, which led to a room in the rear. In this room a dim light was burning, and I saw that it was a sort of kitchen. A very small and very black girl, perhaps of 8 or 9 years old, was sleeping in a bed on the floor in one corner. On the right was an open door, leading to still another room, which was directly in the rear of the one the sailor and I had been sitting in. There was a dim light in this room also, and, as I heard voices inside, I walked up to it and threw the light of my lamp within. I was surprised to find that this small room was occupied by three persons—a young Cuban man, a very light-colored mulatto girl, and I guess about the tiniest baby that ever yelped; but then I'm not much of an authority on babies, and may easily be mistaken. They were so evidently intent upon their own affairs, and so certainly had no designs upon my liberty or property, that I backed out as rapidly as possible and withdrew crestfallen. The young Cuban, who in the second or two that I stood there politely said, "Good evening, Señor," was sitting on the edge of the bed feeding the sick girl something with a spoon. My unexpected appearance did not seem to surprise or annoy them, but I got back to my original quarters as soon as I could, and tried to look, when the old sailor presently came back, as if I had been sitting quietly there all the time. While he was opening the beer I told him I had heard some one else in the house, and asked whether he had any tenants.

"Yes," said he: "I rent the back part of the house to a young fellow, a Cuban, with a mulatto wife and a pretty little baby. He has a hard time of it, poor fellow, for she has been very sick, and is just getting better. He is a mechanic of some sort, and his work is from midnight to noon. It is nearly time for him to be starting now. He is the most devoted husband I ever saw, and in the last three weeks has not left his wife's bedside a minute, they say, except when he was at his work—for they can't afford to hire a nurse, but just have a little colored girl, who sleeps in the kitchen."

"Is it customary," I asked him, "for white men here to marry mulatto wives?"

"Oh, yes," said he. "They don't make much difference on account of color, particularly the foreigners here. Some of the mulatto girls are so nearly white you would never know they had any black blood in them. This fellow's wife is very pretty; I just wish you could see her." And I just thought to myself, as I bade him good night and walked back to the hotel, that he would be considerably astonished if he knew that I had seen her, and that for a few minutes I had held possession of his entire house by force of arms.

If any Key West man happens to read this letter he will say, "What a dunce that correspondent must be to fill half his letter with a description of one of the poorest shanties in the place when we have a beautiful Custom-house he might have described, and two big brick forts and half a dozen fine churches!" But it seemed to me, while walking home, that that evening with the sailor and the Cuban and the fiddle and the sick wife and the yellow pickaninny had given me a better insight into some modes of living in Key West than anything else I had seen, and I think so still.

The stars were out by this time and lighted me back to the hotel. Three hours later, at 2 o'clock in the morning, they were still shining, and the moon was out. I can testify to this of my own knowledge, because the heat and the mosquitoes made sleep impossible, and I went out on my third-story veranda again and smoked and watched the weather. The wind, of which one seldom thinks ashore unless it blows a hurricane, was of the greatest importance to me now, for soon after breakfast the Equator was to start, and a breeze from the right direction would send her scudding toward Nassau. Capt. Albury had been to the hotel to see me the afternoon before.

"If you care for any little luxuries on

the trip," said he, "you'd better take them along; for our fare on the schooner is pretty rough for a New-Yorker."

"Do you eat the schooner fare?" I asked him.

"Oh, yes," said he, "I eat it, of course." "I can stand it if you can," I told him; and he complimented me by saying I'd make a sailor; so some day, by industry and sobriety, I may get to be a 'fore-the-mast hand.

At 2 o'clock on Friday morning there was a lively wind blowing from the north-west; just the right direction to send the Equator and me scudding toward Nassau. The wind was almost a young gale, and I half expected to be summoned to start in the middle of the night, for sailing vessels sometimes do such foolish things when there is a good wind. But there was no such uncomfortable message, and early in the morning another guest in the hotel, who had also taken passage in the Equator for Nassau, came up to say that he had been aboard the schooner, and that we were to start "right after breakfast." Faithful to the last, our young coach driver was on hand soon after daylight to take our baggage to the vessel. We made an imposing procession down to the wharf, the other passenger and I, accompanied by Mr. Barnes, Mr. Chapman, and several other guests in the hotel. But what a queer old fellow the wind is. While we were eating breakfast in the hotel he died out entirely, leaving almost a dead calm. There was said, however, to be something of a breeze out on the water when we once got away from the lee of the land. The sailing of the little schooner was more of an event in Key West, it seemed, than an ocean steamer's start is in New-York. Men and women, white and black, and large numbers of children of every conceivable shade came down to see us off. The schooner lay tied to a wharf, and we had only to step aboard. There were to be, so the Captain had told us, several lady passengers, and among the groups of people who came down to see the vessel off we tried to pick them out. There was a very strong smell of tar and fish, the latter coming from a choice assortment of fish hung up in the rigging to dry, some of which were intended to be eaten during the voyage, but most of which came under the head of passengers' luggage, and were intended for friends in the Bahamas. Our passenger list comprised, in the "first cabin," three ladies, a little girl, two babies, and we two from the hotel; and in the steerage, a rare lot of old and young colored people, whom we saw nothing of at the start, but who kept appearing, unexpectedly, all through the voyage. There was a delay of two or three hours, of course, before we were off; and meantime the scenes on the wharf and aboard the schooner far surpassed in novelty any to be seen on a steam-ship pier; but they belong with the account of the Equator's voyage and will have to bide their time.

W. D.