

Wrecking on the Florida Keys*

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In the autumn of 18__ the good ship AMERICA, L.S.A., master, sailed from New York, bound to Mobile and a European port, and homeward. The vessel had been chartered to take the place of the regular packet in the well-known and popular packet line of the Messrs. E. D. Hurlbut & Co. At the urgent solicitation of her owners, though with great reluctance on his own part, her old commander, Captain A__, who, after a long service at sea, had retired for life, as he

supposed, to his quiet home in F__ H__, Massachusetts, was prevailed upon, for this voyage only, to rejoin his ship.

The passage, up to the date of the fatal catastrophe which resulted in the total loss of the ship and the partial loss of her cargo, was remarkably prosperous and pleasant. In a company of passengers numbering about thirty, ladies and gentlemen, a choice and agreeable society was found. The master of a ship ought to be among the

most prominent and interesting social features on board; and I am sure in the present instance this presumption was true, and I do injustice to none in recording the truth, and assigning to our Captain a high place as a gentleman among others who worthily bore that honorable name.

*See "Behind the Scenes," inside front cover.

For my own part, I found in him my most agreeable companion on board, of whose leisure I was glad to avail myself, in drawing from him results of a varied and extensive observation, and experience of men and things. Nor was our Captain indifferent to the gentler impulses of sympathy with the unfortunate and suffering; and I remember another of his chosen quotations from the poet was the touching appeal:

"When chill November's sturdy blast."

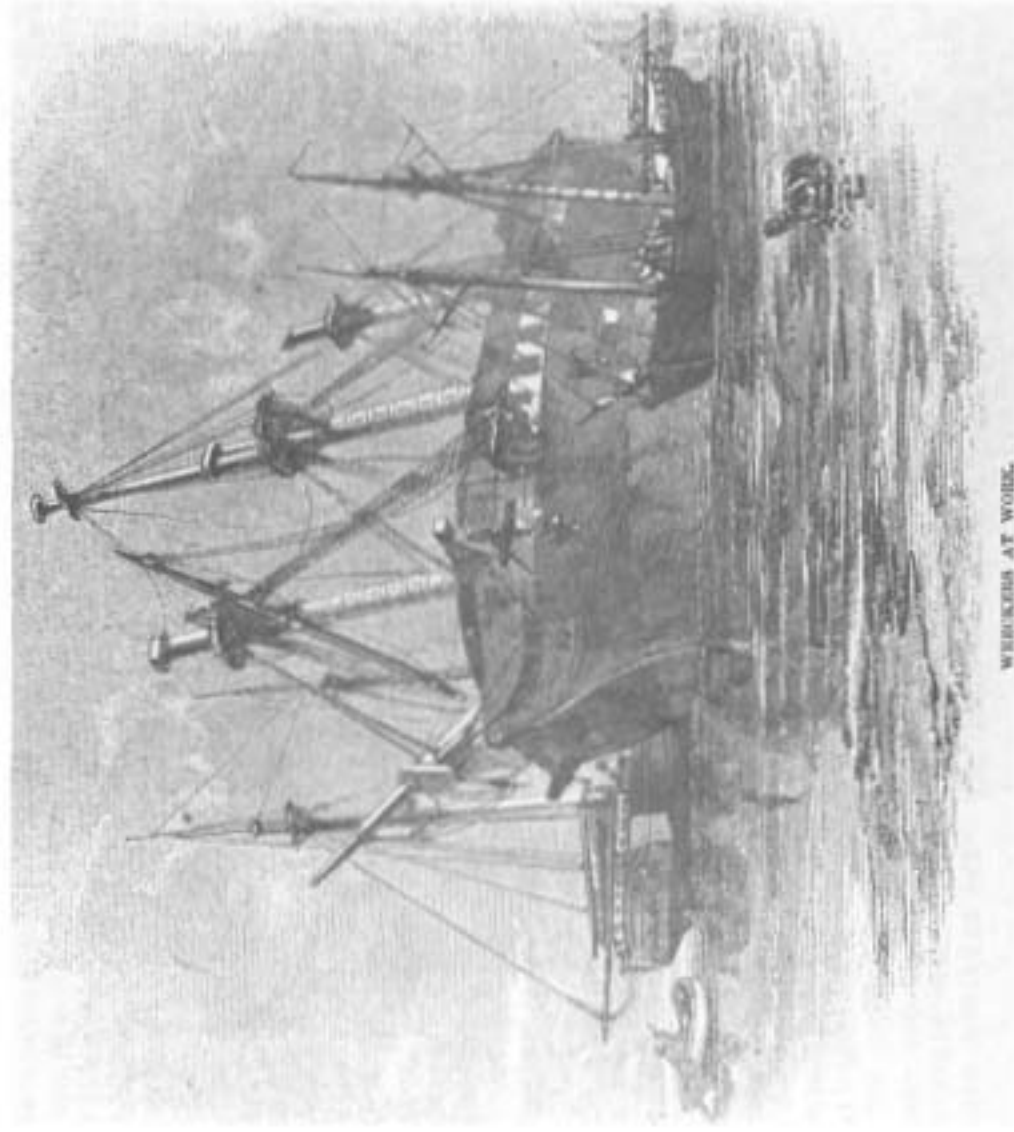
But, withal, Captain A___'s modesty was equal to his literary acquisitions. "Sir," I remarked to him, "you are very familiar with the poets." He instantly replied,

"Mr. ___, you have all."

Our passengers, I have said, made a pleasant company. We had variety. The greater part were connected with trade, merchants and merchants' clerks, returning to their place of business from a summer Northern visit. We had one with us who called himself a lawyer, but our Captain, for some reason, was inclined to think he was "only a marine court lawyer." And what with reading and conversation, eating and sleeping, observing the "wind and weather," watching the ship's progress in dull or lively sailing, and the ever-interesting details of skillful navigation, with such spice of variety as headwinds and squalls might afford, and the excitement

of "Let's go and haul!" reeling, taking in and making sail, that old way of sea voyages before the innovation of ocean steamers, though often tedious, was not without its interest. It was considered good enough when the best that could be had; and even in comparison with steam has, in some respects, its own superior excitement of pleasure.

But to our passage. In good time we made the "Hole in the Wall," and passed Abaco; sailed smoothly over the cream-colored waters of the Bahama banks, making our con-ge' to King John in passing his dominions; enjoyed a holy Sabbath-day and its Christian worship with a solemnity and depth of devotion which a "Sabbath at



WRECKERS AT WORK.

sea" helps so much to inspire; against a headwind and in a dark night beat in safety through Providence Channel; doubled the Isaacs, and passed the Double-headed Shot Keys, prominent waymarks, and without accident or harm stood on our course, running along the line of the Keys of Florida, unconscious and unsuspecting of danger.

On the evening of the sad disaster all on board were unusually cheerful. The weather was fine, balmy, soothing - in a word, tropical. All felt the joyfulness of the approaching termination of our passage; the last turning-point was at hand; soon we were to haul up for our "northwest course," and when Tortugas light was nearly a-beam, with mutual pleasant congratulations and hopeful anticipations, all retired ten o'clock below, saying, "No more land will be seen till we make Mobile light."

An hour passed away, and all was still as sleep could make the occupants of their several berths. It was a calm, starlight, gently-breezing night, and our gallant bark, borne onward in her course by the hardly whispering wind, was making easy progress, when suddenly she brought up all standing and hard aground.

In a moment all were startled from their berths, in unexpected mingled terror and surprise. Soundings were made forward, aft, and in all directions around the ship, and our position was ascertained upon a sunken reef. Sails were backed, and all possible efforts made to clear the reef, but in vain.

Soon the falling tide revealed still more our danger. The ship careened more and more upon her side, and

showed that she had grounded during high water. And now, among us all, speculations were indulged upon the probable cause of our calamity - how it was possible the ship could have been drawn so much out of our course, whether by a strong current which set us upon the reef, or by a hazy atmosphere - though the sky was cloudless - which had dimmed the light of the Dry Tortugas, and made the distance from it seem greater than it was; or whether - a conjecture which the circumstances contributed to suggest - the keeper of the lighthouse, in complicity with some wrecker, had willfully obscured the light, in the hope of luring the ship to her destruction upon the reef.

This last hypothesis our commander thought most probable. "We are," he exclaimed, "victims of the piratical wreckers!"

The morning dawned upon a seemingly hopeless wreck. The sea was still smooth, as it had been fortunately through the night, but the ship was hard aground. No steamer was near to be called to our relief, and the prospect of getting afloat was sufficiently gloomy.

Soon a small fishing-smack came near, and from it a rough specimen of humanity, who said he was master of the smack, boarded us. He held also a wrecker's license. He was, therefore, not regarded very favorably by our company, more especially as he had been seen to come to us from the direction of the Tortugas light.

Though years have since passed away, in my memory I have a distinct impression of the man, hailing from the ancient town of G____, Connecticut, as he stood upon our

deck by the starboard bulwarks, a stout, burly, red-faced, sun-burned sailor, whose only clothing consisted of a Guernsey shirt, pantaloons, rolled up to his knees, and a slouched, weather-beaten hat, without stockings or shoes. With some stretch of fancy, Byron's description of the meeting of Gabriel and Satan may represent the cold civility of this occasion, as to the skipper and our worthy Captain:

"Between his darkness
and his brightness
There passed a mutual
glance of great politeness."

Offers of assistance were made by the skipper, but refused, not only because the charge was high, but also and chiefly, because our Captain feared, perhaps wisely, that he might be drawn into still greater danger. The captain of the smack left us, but evidently with the conviction that his opportunity would come.

Captain A____ meanwhile was not idle. All that ingenuity and skill could devise was attempted to save the ship. The time of highwater was approaching. A kedge anchor was carried out astern, all hands were at the windlass, and at high-water, as was hoped but hardly expected, the ship floated! The scene on board was full of joy and activity, sails were trimmed, every man at his post, but unfortunately it was impossible to "fetch by" the reef; and again the ship grounded, driven even farther on than before. This was our situation for another night.

Another day came, and with it other plans for saving the ship. The wind now rose,

and we were thumping severely. It was determined to lighten the vessel, and, at high-water, try to drive her with all sail over the reef. Again the wrecker came on board, and in answer to our Captain's inquiries gave advice as to a place of anchorage if required. The ship, under a heavy press of sail and a strong wind, was carried over the reef, but in the act of passing the rudder was unshipped and rendered useless. Now all was bustle and hurrying to and fro. By trimming sails the ship was steered to the anchorage pointed out by the wrecker, near a key to the southwest of the light-house; but too near, for during the night following the wind rose to half a gale, and before morning the anchor had dragged, the ship again struck bottom, and the stern was fast burying itself in the sands of lee-shore.

The end had now come. The next morning the ship struck more heavily, the wind increased, and the wreck, driven first stern-wise, was now broadside upon the key. The wrecker had left us the night previous and returned to the light-house. Noon came, and everything was ominous of danger. It made our Captain's heart ache, as the ship struck and ground heavily upon the coral rocks beneath.

"Would," he exclaimed, "that my body instead were grinding upon these rocks!"

Preparations were now ordered to be made for leaving the ship, as it might be unsafe to remain on board through the coming night, and a raft was begun upon which to float the passengers to the shore.

These preparations were stayed by the timely return

of our wrecker with his smack. His opportunity had arrived. With much difficulty he succeeded in taking off all our passengers with our luggage, and landing us on the Dry Tortugas island. It was after dark when we were landed. Upon the island the only dwelling was that of the light-keeper. This, with only two rooms, was given up to the passengers. To one room the ladies were assigned; in the other, and on the piazzas, the gentlemen distributed themselves as best they could. Stores were brought from the wreck the next day for the use of the company.

Now, according to the rules of professional wrecking, the voyage was ended; the wreck belonged to the underwriters; the wrecker who "first came" must be "first served" with the opportunity of saving property, ostensibly for the underwriters, but quite as much for the wrecker's own benefit. Our wrecker, with his crew of two or three fishermen, among whom the deputy light-keeper figured familiarly, had obtained complete possession of his prize.

Captain A___, anxious to promote the interests of the underwriters, immediately asked the wrecker to assist him in getting word to Key West, the rendezvous of wreckers, for more assistance in saving the wrecked cargo. The vessel having bilged, the value of the goods was hourly diminishing. Fair promises were made to these requests; the only means of conveyance was the light-house boat, a small sloop-rigged open boat of about five tons - that boat, it was assured, should be sent. But there the matter ended.

Three days thus passed a-

way. The wrecker meanwhile was busy about the wreck. Our Captain became impatient, and insisted that he should fulfill his promise. Then, seeing the Captain's decision, he consented that the next day the boat should be sent, in charge of the deputy light-keeper. Some of our passengers also volunteered to accompany the expedition. Among these was our "lawyer," who thought the occasion a favorable one for distinguishing his zeal and courage. The time for setting out came. The morning was calm and delightfully mild. Not without some foreboding of failure Captain A___ saw the party off, wishing them a safe and speedy passage.

It was not, as must be confessed, a small undertaking to make the passage - a distance of from sixty to seventy miles -- in so small a craft. But none was so confident and boastful of "going through" as our lawyer. "The thing," he said, "can and shall be done!"

Long, owing to the prevailing calm, the tiny boat remained in view, making but little progress. At length a breeze sprang up, and it was wafted out of sight.

The exposure and anxiety which our Captain had suffered had brought upon him a severe attack of fever. He had taken up his quarters, for the sake of greater quiet, on the ground floor of the light-house. At his request I bore him company. He was sick in body and sick at heart.

"How foolish I was," he said, "to leave my home for this voyage! Yet now I would like to make another, only to give the Dry Tortugas a wide berth."

Evening came, and the unwelcome news of our re-

turning expedition spread through our company. When the party landed, and told their own story, it was plain that the light-keeper had been at work with their fears. This was singularly confirmed, and divulged, with other things, the same night. For, while the Captain and myself were in our place upon the floor of the light-house, the deputy light-keeper and wrecker passed in and by us, and went up to the top of the light-house, and there commenced talking about the incidents of the previous

day. The winding staircase constituted an excellent whispering-gallery; so that their ordinary tones in conversation were distinctly heard.

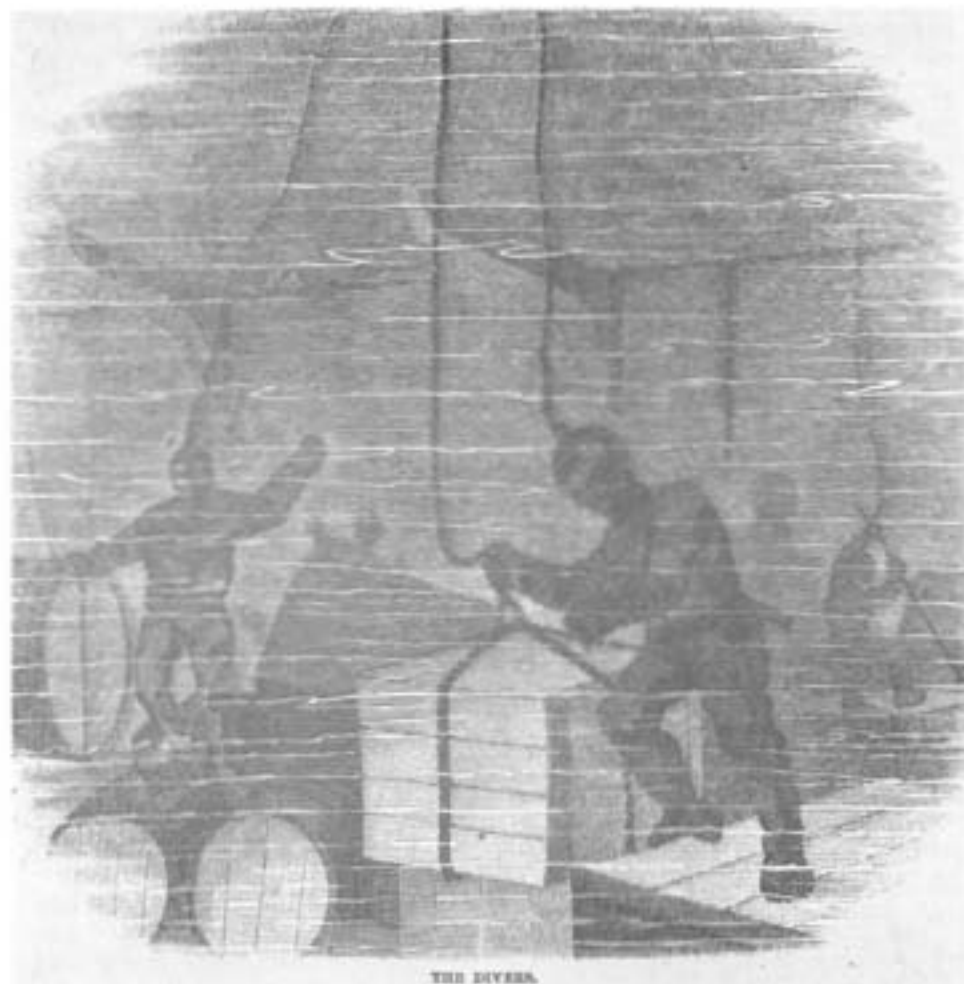
The deputy light-keeper said he had represented to those with him most formidable obstacles to be encountered -- calms and head-winds, a long passage at the best, and liability to meet severe squalls and northers. The effect he designed was attained. And now, over this result, the wrecker and light-keeper re-

joiced heartily. Prospects of a rich harvest were brighter than ever; and in the view of it the wrecker, with marked satisfaction, said, "If the boat can be kept back another day, I shall be able to get all I wish, and then she may go!" Captain A___, hearing this, said to me, "Now the boat shall go; and that tomorrow morning, even if I am obliged, sick as I am, to go myself in her!"

The importance of our overhearing this conversation, in its relations to the coming suit, will be seen in the sequel. The circumstances made me a competent witness in the case.

In further planning about this trip, Captain A___ said he would undertake it if I would accompany him. To this I assented; and the next morning the light-keeper, who did not make any resistance, with a boy to assist in the business of sailing, and ourselves, embarked in the little boat for a second, and, as it proved, successful experiment.

The early morning was calm as the previous one. Soon, however, a breeze arose, but it was dead ahead. Our first stretch was on a starboard tack, by which we stood out into the Gulf. Late in the afternoon, the wind being fresh, we tacked ship and crossed the line of the chain of Keys, and passed to the northward of them. At midnight the weather became decidedly squally. The first two or three squalls were comparatively light. Then followed one which came upon us as a horrible tempest. The first blast from it knocked us down upon our beam ends. To add to our danger, when an attempt was made to let go the halyards they were found



THE DIVERS.

to be foul. We were for a few moments in imminent danger. Indeed, I am confident we should have been capsized, only that, by dint of the greatest exertion, the peak was lowered enough to shake the wind partly out of the sail, and so were we saved.

After this experience of the skill and watchfulness of our "ship's company," we kept a sharp look-out to windward ourselves. This squall over, we had light and baffling winds the remainder of the night; but as morning dawned a regular norther set in, which, under shortened sail, carried us onward rapidly, and for the last two or three miles, being to the northward, providentially, of our port, we ran down to it under "bare poles," unable to carry any sail.

While still a distance we were descried by the people of Key West, and crowds were gathering -- the light-house boat being recognized -- on the dock awaiting our arrival. The visit of this boat being unexpected by them, their conjectures as to the reason of it were shown by the inquiry which first greeted us on landing, "A wreck?" And the next, "Where?" showed the nature of their anxiety as well on the subject. The answers to these simple questions fulfilled one great purpose of our mission. The message was delivered, and it had its effect.

Before we left the wharf, though a perfect gale was blowing, preparations were making on board several wrecking vessels to set out immediately for "the wreck." Some did set out, but the severity of the norther was so great that they were soon obliged to put back. Among these vessels was a fishing

smack, just in from Havana, having a deck-load of oranges. In the haste for departure the fruit was by shovelfuls thrown overboard, some falling upon the deck, but the greater part into the sea.

Captain A___ and myself were glad at once to go to a hotel and order breakfast, not having eaten anything for more than twenty-four hours past. With sharpened appetites we sat down to a table of Key West beefsteaks (green turtle), with other dishes to match. At the suggestion and request of Captain A___ the Divine hand was gratefully acknowledged, which had safely rescued us out of our great perils, and brought us to our desired haven. "We should be most ungrateful," said he, on a subsequent occasion, "if we failed to recognize the providence of God in our deliverance from the greatest danger in which I have ever known myself to be found. For, in this instance, no resource was left to us, but our own frail craft. At other times of peril, in storm or shipwreck, I had relief in thinking of my boats or other means of safety at command, but here we had nothing of the kind."

A part of our business also was to engage a vessel to proceed to the Tortugas, and take on board our passengers and convey them to their destination. The next day she sailed, and in her we returned to the scene of the wreck. At the earnest request of Captain A___ I remained, not joining my fellow-passengers, though it was highly important that I should have gone. For the purpose of appearing as a witness in the salvage suit at Key West I consented to stay.

I had now a fortnight or more upon my hands, some 8 or 10 days of which I spent at the Tortugas, while the work of saving goods from the wreck was going forward. Alone, or in company with Captain A___, I occupied a part of this time in exploring the reefs, as portions of them were left bare by the retreating tide. How the recesses of the coral beds, the chambers of busy, wondrous life, teemed with the varied uncounted forms of existences inhabiting the deep! Or, breaking in pieces the coral rocks, were revealed, imbedded within them, the date and almond bivalves. There were the star-fish, sea-urchin, and these and other genera, with their almost endless species. Strange scenes in living forms all around in view; while the reefs and islands -- all the solid substances beneath and above the water -- were the remains of now extinct life.

The first wrecker had precedence of all the rest in privileges at the wreck, and, before the arrival of the reinforcement, had succeeded in discharging all, or nearly all, of the dry and undamaged goods. Then came the more difficult work of breaking up the cargo from the lower hold and out of the water, which, at the flow and ebb of the tide, rose and fell in the bilged vessel. The last and most difficult of all this business was that of the divers, who had been trained in the waters around New Providence, and who now persevered in their work deep in the vessel's hold, fore and aft, making fast to huge boxes and bales of merchandise, and this notwithstanding the water, was discolored and made nauseous by dye-stuffs, drugs, medicines,

and poisons, too; and left not their unwelcome though gainful employment until it became absolutely insupportable.

The business of wrecking ended, the wet goods dried as far as they could be by exposure on the neighboring Key, all were then put on board the wrecking vessels and taken to Key West.

On returning myself in one of these vessels to Key West, I found the place astir with an additional excitement, growing out of another wreck which had occurred upon Carysfort Reef about the time of our own. This wreck of a large merchantman - large according to the standard of the times - with a full cargo of assorted merchandise, gave also employment to a large party of wreckers, as desirous as ours of making a prize.

Following in the order of things, the public sale of the wrecked goods took place under the orders of the Admiralty Court, the savings of each wrecker or association of wreckers being kept distinct from those of other parties.

The next and the last in this business was the suit for salvage in the Court of Admiralty, which could not fail to be regarded with special interest by all concerned.

It was interesting to myself, and it may be to others, to trace some of the distinguishing features of the system of wrecking. The great risk to commerce in the dangerous navigation of the Florida Keys - frequent wrecks and heavy losses of property in vessels and cargoes, - prompted the establishment of the scheme. It was too great an interest to leave to the possibilities

of a precarious and sadly partial relief.

The system of wrecking, therefore, was established, consisting in the issue, by the Court of Admiralty, of wrecking "licenses," which are ever subject to the authority and control and revocation, for reasons, of that court. The penalties of any abuse of privilege or other dishonesty in the prosecution of the business of wrecking, involve not only a recall of the license, but also a forfeiture of compensation in salvage fees, and in extreme cases, of the privilege of a license temporarily or forever.

Licenses may be held by parties engaged in the coasting and inter-island trade; and among these are such as are employed in supplying the markets of Cuba with fish caught along the Florida reefs, to which class our man of G___, Connecticut, belonged.

At the date of the events of the present narrative the Admiralty Court of Key West was presided over by Judge W___ the independent.

The wreckers held "the Judge" in awful reverence; for while they could not fail to pay respect to his person, they with reason feared his justice.

I was puzzled to understand how the wreckers, who as a class were no better than they should have been, were controlled. "Oh," he said, in reply to my inquiry on this point, "that is easily done. If they commit any offense against honor or justice, instantly I take from them their licenses." This was summary and effectual government.

The trade and business of all kinds being at this time exceedingly small in Key

West, the business of wrecking, in its various relations and details, constituted no inconsiderable source of material gain. It offered opportunities for investment of capital, and speculative trade in wrecked cargoes and wrecked and condemned vessels. The wreckers especially found their harvest in decrees of salvage.

The percentage for salvage varies according to circumstances. It may appear extravagantly high in all cases. But a large compensation is essential, as an inducement to the wrecker, to undergo hazard and exposure and to toil in his business. The experiment had been made by the Board of Underwriters in New York of fitting out a wrecking schooner of their own, and sending her to Key West in the hope of a gain to their interests. But the experiment signally failed. The wrecking service is one which can not be maintained by ordinary rates of wages and compensation. The underwriters' vessel consequently remained idly, or laggardly at best, in port, while the independent wreckers were braving the storms and hard-ships of a most trying business.

When it is considered how much of the wrecker's time is unemployed, how greatly hazardous his service, and often how small the amount of value of goods saved, surprise will be much less on account of the high salvage rates which go to sustain the entire corps and scheme of wrecking.

The humane aspects of the system are signally cheering. As in the case of our wreck, so likewise in every one, the attention of the wreckers is first turned to the preservation of the pas-



THE RAFT.

salvor proceeded to the wreck.

Of the perishable lading nothing could of course be saved; and after stripping the wreck, all the available rigging, sails, chains, and other furniture, were carried into Key West.

"In this case," said Judge W___, "I awarded to the salvor all the avails of the articles saved, in value not over three or four hundred dollars, as a just though inadequate compensation for efforts in saving human life. And this was the first and only instance in which I ever gave an award for such an object."

And it is a specially memorable fact, as related to me by the same authority, that in all the preceding period of the existence of the wrecking system up to that time, not a single human life had been lost by shipwreck in the entire sphere over which the wreckers cruised.

Only a few years after that date, sad to narrate, in a most terrific gale which swept along the Florida Keys, this pleasant aspect was changed, not through any fault of the wreckers, but by an awfully destructive hurricane, which drove scores of vessels upon the reefs and keys, and destroyed many wrecking vessels with their brave and hardy crews.

Of the mode of conducting a salvage suit little need be said, as it falls under the general rules governing civil cases. That in the present instance the forms of law were strictly observed, and impartial audience was given to the parties in the case, and due regard paid to the several interests involved, and that dignity and decorum marked the whole course of the proceedings,

sengers and their baggage. And for this service it is not considered that any award is bestowed.

The only exception to this last remark must be reserved for a case peculiar in its circumstances, and especially interesting in its character, which was related to me by Judge W___ . A brig laden with sugars, bound from Havana to a European port, was wrecked upon a reef to the eastward of Key West. On board the vessel, besides the crew, were four or five passengers. Only one boat remained from the wreck fit for use, and this was too small to hold the entire company in escaping from the wreck.

A raft was constructed and the party divided, some en-

tering the boat and others embarking upon the raft, which was attached by a rope to the boat for the purpose of being towed to the nearest Key. The attempt was made accordingly, but in vain. No progress could be made in a rough sea and against a head wind and current. Reluctantly, but of necessity, the raft with the people upon it was cast adrift. The boat alone reached the island, and the party falling in with a wrecker reported the wreck and the abandoned raft. The wrecker went immediately in pursuit of the raft and its freight of human life, and for two days watchfully and anxiously cruised for it, until it was found and the people upon it were rescued. Then, and not till then, the

may well be supposed from the courtly and upright bearing and character of the presiding judge.

An incident in the progress of the affair occurred which showed the wisdom and independence of the court. One of the attorneys remarked; "May it please the court, I undertake to prove thus and so." The Judge replied, "The court, Sir, will waive that matter." Judge W___ was well aware that testimony in form would be given as offered, but in effect it would prove nothing. I inquired in private of the Judge, "How do you receive such evidence as you are sometimes obliged to hear?" He replied, "I regard more the manner than the matter of it."

A heavy penalty was inflicted among the decisions in the case of the Carysford Reef wreck. It was charged that a certain wrecker had received from the wreck goods which he failed to deliver at Key West. Further, this wrecker had on the way stopped at his home at I___ Key. The main fact having been proved, the wrecker was denied all salvage for his four vessels employed, and deprived also of his wrecking license.

In the case of our own wreck, and with reference to the special matter about which I had been detained, the first wrecker forfeited the higher rate to which he would have been entitled but for the sinister part he played in preventing messages from being forwarded sooner to Key West for assistance; the proof of which criminality on his part, as has been related, his own lips furnished in the top of the Tortugas light. For this guilty interference he was made to suffer, in having his

salvage cut down from fifty or sixty per cent, to thirty-five per cent, upon the amount of goods saved by his vessel. This difference in percentage against himself inured to the advantage of the underwriters in the sum total of several thousands of dollars.

Of all concerned, none experienced a more grateful relief than the Captain of the lost AMERICA, when the last act of this business was completed, in the closing up of the several salvage suits by the decrees of the court, and the disbursement to each wrecker, or association of wreckers, of the several awards in their favor. The underwriters' portion was the residuum. And it is justly due to Captain A___ to say he labored diligently, and at all points, to make this portion as large as possible.

Judge Marvin, the present able Judge of the Admiralty Court of Key West, in a recently published work on "Wreck and Salvage," gives some interesting information on the present condition of the wrecking system. Forty-seven vessels, averaging fifty tons, and carrying about eight men each, held licenses during the year 1858.

This number was found fully adequate to the wants of commerce. About one half the vessels engaged in wrecking associate with this the business of fishing for the Havana market. The United States District Court for this district was established in 1847. The Judge alone has authority to license wrecking vessels.

The act of authority provides that "No vessel nor master thereof shall be regularly employed in the business of wrecking on the

coast of Florida without the license of the Judge of said Court; and before licensing any vessel or master, the Judge shall be satisfied that the vessel is sea-worthy, and properly and sufficiently fitted and equipped for the purpose of saving property shipwrecked and in distress, and that the master thereof is trustworthy and innocent of any fraud or misconduct in relation to any property ship wrecked or saved on said coast."

Embezzlement of wrecked goods, or voluntarily running a vessel aground under the pretense of piloting her, colluding with the master of a vessel wrecked or in distress, or corrupting him by any unlawful present or promise, are, severally, good causes for withholding or revoking the license.

One inference from the view which my opportunities gave me for observing the operation of the wrecking system is all I have to add upon the whole subject. The scheme is wise, humane, economical, and effective; but there is an obvious necessity that it be narrowly watched and faithfully guarded.

In conclusion, for himself, Captain A___'s lingering, constant regret was that he had been so unwise as to undertake this voyage, and his oft-expressed wish that he might yet make another to the Gulf, only for the opportunity it would afford him to "give a wide berth to the Dry Tortugas."

And if it might add any thing to his cup of earthly happiness, one who loves him as a man and a brother would crave for him the fulfillment of that cherished wish for another opportunity to give "A WIDE BERTH TO THE DRY TORTUGAS!" BL