

The "Old Man" of Sand Key

BY T. JENKINS HAINS

HE was an "old man" when he first made his appearance on the reef at the Sand Key Light. This was years ago, but one could tell it even then by the way he drew in his chin, or rather pouch, in a dignified manner as he soared in short circles over the outlying coral ledges which shone vari-colored in the sunshine beneath the blue waters of the Gulf Stream. He had fished alone for many seasons without joining the smaller and more social birds, and the keepers had grown to know him. Sandy Shackford, the head keeper, knew him well, and relied implicitly upon his judgment as to the location of certain denizens of the warm Stream. He had come back again after a month's absence, and he was circling majestically over the coral banks not a hundred fathoms from the light.

His gray head was streaked with pencilled feathers, which grew longer as they reached his neck, and his breast was colored a dull mottled lead. His back and wings gave a general impression of gray and black, the long pinions of the latter being furnished with stiff quills, which tapered with a lighter shade to the tips. His beak and pouch were of more than ordinary proportions, for the former was heavy and hooked at the end, and the latter was large and elastic, capable of holding a three-pound mullet.

He soared slowly over the reef for some time, and the keeper watched him, sitting upon the rail of the lantern smoking his pipe, while his assistant filled the body of the huge lamp and trimmed its several wicks. To the westward a slight ripple showed upon the surface of the quiet sea. The pelican sighted it, and stood away toward it, for it looked like a mackerel that had come to the surface to take in the sunshine and general beauty of the day. In a moment the "old man" had swung over the spot at a

height of about a hundred feet; then suddenly folding his wings, he straightened out his body, opened his beak, and shot straight downward upon the doomed fish. It was literally a bolt from heaven from out of a clear sky. The lower beak expanded as it hit the water and opened the pouch into a dipper which scooped up the mackerel, while the weight of the heavy body falling from the great height carried everything below the surface with a resounding splash that could be heard distinctly upon the light. Then up he came from the dive, with the fish struggling frantically in his tough leathern sack. He rested a moment to get his breath, and then stretched forth his pinions again and rose in a great circle into the clear blue air.

"The 'old man's' fishin' mackerel this mornin'," said Sandy, "an' I reckon I'll get the dory an' try a squid over along the edge o' the Stream as soon as the breeze makes."

He shoved his small boat off and sprang into her. Then he stepped the mast, and hauling aft the sheet, swung her head round and stood off the reef, riding easily over the low swell. High above him was the lantern, and he looked up, to see Bill gazing down at him and pointing toward the southward, where a ripple showed the breaching fish. His lines were in the after-locker, and he soon had them out, one of them with a wooden squid trolling over the stern as the little craft gathered headway.

The old bird had satisfied his present needs and had flown away to a distant part of the outlying bank, where he was now proceeding to enjoy his catch at leisure. Far away to the northward, where Key West showed above the horizon, a long line of black specks was rapidly approaching through the air. They were the regular fishermen of the reef, and they were bound out to sea this morning for their daily meal. On they

came in single file, like a line of soldiers, their distance apart remaining regular, and the motions of their leader followed with military precision. Every time he would strike the air several sharp strokes with his wings, the motion would be instantly taken up by the long line of followers, flapping their own in unison.

The "old man" heeded them very little indeed as he quietly ate his fish, and they knew enough not to bother him. They sailed majestically past, and swung in huge circles over the blue Gulf to locate the passing school.

The "old man" mused as he ate, and wondered at their stupidity. Even the light-keeper knew as much as they. There was the breaching school a mile away to windward, and the stupid birds were still watching him.

He saw his wives go past in line. There was old Top-knot, a wise and ugly companion of former days, the pencilled feathers on her neck rubbed the wrong way. Behind her came a young son, an ingrate, who even now would try to steal the fish from him did he but leave it for a moment to dive for another. Further behind came his youngest companion, one who had hatched forth twelve stout birds during the past few years, and who was still supple and vigorous, her smooth feathers still showing a gloss very pretty to look at. But she gave him no notice, and he ate in silence until they all passed far beyond and sighted at last the breaching mackerel.

The sun rose higher, and the scorching reef glared in the fierce light. The "old man" shifted his feet on the burning sand and turned his head toward the west, where Mangrove Key rose like a dark green bush a few feet above the water of the reef. Two small specks were in the blue void above it, and his eyes instantly detected them and remained staring at them with unwinking gaze.

The specks grew larger rapidly, but they were a long way off yet, and he might be mistaken as to what they were. But if they were what he took them to be, there would be trouble on the reef before long. Then he noticed one of the objects swerve slightly to the eastward, and he saw they were indeed a pair of the

great bald eagles from the Everglades of Florida—cruellest of killers, as implacable and certain in their purpose as the grim destroyer himself.

The white head of the leading pirate shone in the sunshine, and his fierce eyes were fixed upon the fishermen. The "old man" was apparently unnoticed, although there was little within the sweep of that savage gaze that was left unmarked. He was a huge, tough old fellow, and he dreaded nothing. He gazed at the fishermen, and a feeling of disdain for their weakness came upon him. He thought of his old scolding mate, Top-knot. What a scared old bird she would be in a moment with that great eagle sailing straight as a bullet for her, his beak agape, and his hoarse scream sounding in her wake! How she would make for the open sea, only to be caught in a few moments and torn until she disgorged her fish! His eldest son would make a show of fight, perhaps, and in a very few minutes would be a badly used-up pelican. As for the rest, how they would wildly and silently strike for the open ocean, only to be overtaken one by one until they were all ripped and torn by the fierce fighters, who would follow leisurely along behind, striking and clutching, screaming and calling, to increase their fright and dismay!

He was almost amused at the prospect, for the pirate birds seemed to know him instinctively for a barren prize, and swept with the speed of the wind past him and over the reef to the blue waters of the Gulf beyond, where the fishermen were still unaware of their approach. He swung himself around and gazed seaward again, and suddenly the thought of his uselessness came upon him. Why should he sit there and see this thing done? He, an "old man." He had led the flock for many years. Should he, the father of many and the companion of all in former days, see them cut up by two enemies? What if they no longer cared for him? Was he not the leader, the one they had looked to in the years gone by? Memories of former days came to him, and something made him raise his head very straight and draw his pouch close in.

He sat gazing for a few moments longer. The eagles now had closed up

half the distance, for they were going with a rush. A pelican saw them and headed straight out to sea, striking the air wildly with outstretched pinions. Then in they dashed with hoarse cries that caused the keeper in the boat to luff into the wind to witness the struggle. Then the "old man" launched his weight into the air, and with a few sudden strokes rose to the height of a couple of fathoms above the sea, bearing down toward the screaming birds with the rapidity of an express train.

Above Sandy Shackford a very mixed affair was taking place. The two eagles had dashed into the pelicans without warning, and were within striking distance before many of them could even turn to flee. Old Top-knot had just caught a fine fish, and was in the act of rising with it when the leading eagle swooped down upon her with a shrill scream. She was an old and nervous bird, and a touch from any other creature she dreaded at all times. Now right behind her came a giant shape with glaring eyes and gaping beak, a very death's-head, white and grisly, while beneath were a pair of powerful feet armed with sharp talons ready to seize her in a deadly grip. She gave a desperate leap to clear the sea and stretch her wings, but the sight was too much for her, and she sank back helpless upon the surface.

In an instant the eagle was upon her. He seized her fiercely in his talons and struck her savagely in the back, and the poor old bird instantly disgorged her newly caught fish. Her savage assailant hesitated a moment before striking her down for good and all, and at that instant there was a tremendous rush through the air, and a huge body struck him full in the breast, knocking him floundering upon the sea. The "old man" had come at him as straight as a bullet from a gun, and with the full force of his fifteen pounds sailing through the air, had struck him with his tough old body that had been hardened by many a high dive from above.

The eagle was completely taken aback, and struggled quickly into the air to get out of that vicinity, while the "old man," carried along by the impetus of his rush, soared around in a great circle, and came slowly back to renew the attack.

In a moment the eagle had recovered, and with true game spirit swung about to meet this new defender of fishermen. They met in mid-air about two fathoms above the sea, and Sandy Shackford cheered wildly for his old acquaintance as he landed a heavy blow with his long hooked bill.

"Go it, old man!" he cried. "Give it to him! Oh, if I had my gun, wouldn't I soak him for ye!"

The other birds had fled seaward, and were now almost out of sight, being pursued by the second eagle. One limp form floated on the sea to mark the course of the marauder. Old Top-knot had recovered from the shock, and was now making a line for Cuba. The "old man" was the only one left, and he was detaining the great bald eagle for his last fight, the fight of his life.

Around and around they soared. The eagle was wary, and did not wish to rush matters with the determined "old man," who, with beak drawn back, sailed about ready for a stroke. Then, disdaining the clumsy old fellow, the bald eagle made a sudden rush as though he would end the matter right there. The "old man" met him, and there was a short scrimmage in the air, which resulted in both dropping to the sea. Here the "old man" had the advantage. The eagle could not swim, his powerful talons not being made for propelling him over the water. The "old man" managed to hold his own, although he received a savage cut from the other's strong beak. This round was a draw. During this time the second eagle had seen that his companion was not following the startled game, and he returned just in time to see his companion disengage from a whirlwind of wings and beaks, and to wait a moment to decide just how he would finish off the old fellow who had the hardihood to dispute his way. Then he joined the fight, and together they swooped down upon the "old man" for the finish.

He met them with his head well up and wings outstretched, and gave them so much to do that they were entirely taken up with the affair, and failed to notice Sandy Shackford, who was creeping up, paddling with all his strength with an oar blade.

The encounter could not last long.

The old fellow was rapidly succumbing to the attacks of his powerful antagonists, and though he still kept the mix-up in a whirl of foam with his desperate struggles, he could not hope to last against two such pirates as were now pitted against him. One of them struck him fiercely and tore his throat open, ripping his pouch from end to end. He was weakening fast, and he knew the struggle must end in another rush.

Both eagles came at him at once, uttering hoarse cries, and drawing back his head, he made one last desperate stroke with his hooked beak. Then something seemed to crash down upon his foes from above. An oar blade whirled in the sunshine and struck the leading eagle upon the head, knocking him lifeless upon the sea. Then the other rose quickly and started off to the northward as the form of the keeper towered above in the bow of the approaching boat.

Sandy Shackford picked the great white-headed bird from the water and dropped him into the boat, and the "old man" looked on, wondering. He had known the keeper for a long time, but had never been at close quarters.

"Poor old man!" said Sandy; "ye look mighty badly used up." And he made a motion toward him.

But the old pelican wanted no sympathy. His was the soul of the leader, and he scorned help. Stretching forth his wings, with a mighty effort he arose from the sea. The reef lay but a short distance away, and he would get ashore to rest. The pain in his throat was choking him, but he would sit quiet awhile and get well. He would not go far, but he would be alone. The whole sea shimmered dizzily in the sunshine, but a little rest and the old bones would be right again. He would be quiet and alone.

"Poor old man!" said Sandy, as he watched him sail away. "He's a dead pelican, but he made a game fight."

Then he hauled in his lines, and

squaring away before the wind, ran down to the light, with the eagle and a dozen fine fish in the bottom of his dory.

The next day the "old man" was not fishing on the reef. The other birds came back, all except one. But the "old man" failed to show up during the day.

The next day and the next came and went, and Sandy began to give up all hope of seeing him again. Then, in the late afternoon, when the other birds were away, the "old man" came sailing slowly over the water, and landed stiffly on the coral of a point just awash at the end of the key.

As the sun was setting the "old man" swung himself slowly around to face it. He drew his head well back and held himself dignified and stately as he walked to the edge of the surf. There he stopped, and as the flaming orb sank beneath the western sea the "old man" still stood watching it as it disappeared.

In the morning the keeper looked out, and the "old man" was sitting silent and stationary as before. When the day wore on and he did not start out fishing, Sandy took the dory and rowed to the jutting reef. He walked slowly toward the "old man," not wishing to disturb him, but to help him if he could. He drew near, and the old bird made no motion. He reached slowly down, and the head he touched was cold.

Sitting there, with the setting sun shining over the Southern sea, the "old man" had died. He was now cold and stiff, but even in death he sat straight and dignified, waiting quietly for the end. He had died as a leader should.

"Poor old man!" said Sandy; "his pouch was cut open an' he jest naterally starved to death—couldn't hold no fish, an' as fast as he'd catch 'em they'd get away. It was a mean way to kill a fine old bird. Ye have my sympathy, old man. I came nigh goin' the same way once myself."

And then, as if not to disturb him, the keeper walked on his toes to his boat and shoved off



Cremona

BY W. L. ALDEN

FIVE successive times have I started from Paris or London with the firm resolve to go to Cremona, but never until last spring did I succeed in reaching it. Sometimes I reached Milan, Brescia, Mantua, Parma, Pavia, or Piacenza, which last-mentioned town is nearer than any of the others to Cremona, in point of miles, although it is connected with Cremona only by the slowest of tramways; but I could never break through the charmed circle and gain the centre. Something always happened to convince me that I must give up visiting Cremona for that particular time. Certain of my friends, who are not strong in geography, and who take no interest in violins, began to doubt the existence of Cremona, and to insinuate that when a man annually leaves home for the avowed purpose of going to Cremona, and invariably returns saying that he has not yet visited that elusive town, it is time that his real and not his pretended destination should be made the subject of investigation on the part of his family and friends. It finally became evident to me that unless I went to Cremona my reputation for veracity would be gone, and my character as a moderately moral man would seriously suffer.

Therefore on one miserably rainy day last April I left the train at Brescia and took the branch railway to Cremona. My feelings were very much like those of a man who is ordered by his physician to some horribly healthy and uninteresting place. I had come that morning from Venice, and was suffering from the indigestion which is the penalty of breakfasting at the Verona station. I wanted to go on to Milan, where I could be sure of a good dinner and a comfortable bed. But I was firm. I said to myself: "This time it is either Cremona or ruin. If you venture home with that same old story of having decided not to go to Cremona until next year, all your respectable

friends will feel compelled to drop you." So, filled with gloom, and hating Cremona with a bitter hatred, I took the train—it was a goods train with a solitary passenger-carriage—and rolled slowly across the Lombard Plain. I mention the Lombard Plain because all respectable tourists who have ever travelled in the north of Italy always speak of crossing, or traversing, or rolling over the Lombard Plain, when they go from one town to another. This is done lest people should imagine that when you travel in Lombardy you pass the Rocky Mountains, or cross the English Channel. The conscientious traveller cannot be too careful to tell the exact truth on all trivial occasions. He can thus reserve his imagination for more important subjects.

I reached Cremona in due time—that is to say, an hour after the time-table said that I should have reached the town; but when I drove from the station to the hotel I was glad that I had made the journey. The guide-books are right. Cremona is better worth visiting than are dozens of the regular show-places of Italy. It has not yet been spoiled either by the mania for improvement or by the footsteps of the Cook tourist. Lying for centuries in a sort of social and political eddy, it has kept more of the mediæval characteristics than have any other Lombard towns. I fell in love with Cremona at first sight, not merely because she is picturesque, but because of her placid, sympathetic temperament. She is the sort of city with whom a quiet and studious man could spend his life, and never have his municipal felicity ruffled by coarse buildings, cold and heartless avenues, or worldly, fashionable, sneering streets. The buildings of Cremona are thoughtful, and her streets simple, gentle, and unassuming. She may not be beautiful like Florence, nor bustling and epigrammatic like Milan, nor fascinating and wicked like Naples, but she is eminently a city that a man