



## CRABBING ON GREAT SOUTH BAY

BY I. K.

**A**MONG the many persons who delight in the delicacy of crab-salad and deviled crabs, comparatively few know with what heart-breaking work the gathering of these blue beauties is accomplished. I had been one of the many, but by rare good fortune I became one of the few, while I was spending a few midwinter weeks in Bay Shore, a flourishing town on the "South Side" of Long Island.

Being an enthusiastic, although a decidedly amateur yachtsman, soon after my arrival I wandered to the "dock" at the foot of Ocean avenue, and there made an examination of the famous "South Bay" boats. Enormous cat-boats and hardy looking sloops were to be seen on all sides, and I was fairly lost in admiration when I chanced to address a stalwart young man who courteously answered my questions and finally asked me to "come aboard."

I gladly accepted the invitation and was soon seated in the "after cabin" of the *Itakit*. This famous sloop is about thirty-seven feet "on top," and carries a big spread of canvas, as her spars showed at first glance. Of course "she's the fastest and ablest boat in the fleet." This after-cabin

was certainly a joy forever, although scarcely of great beauty. A low bunk, perhaps two and a half feet wide, on either side furnished the seats and beds of the captain and crew. A small coal stove, placed amidships of the forward end of the cabin, gave out a generous and grateful heat. On the side of the stove a little tea-kettle was humming merrily; and altogether, after we had lighted our pipes and fallen to talking, the cabin was as comfortable a place as I ever rested in.

Of course I heard many yarns of the bay and the various boats, to say nothing of their respective owners and captains—every man or full-grown boy in Bay Shore is a "captain." I also discovered that business was very dull, prices never so low, and money never so tight; the winds had never been so heavy at this season of the year, the tides were unusually high and, in fact, everything was going to the dogs. But with all his kicking, my good host was an amiable and agreeable fellow; and as growling is a most necessary qualification for good seamanship, I was sure that my new-found friend must be a rattling fine skipper.

I discovered that at any time



"ITAKIT."

I should desire to accompany him on any of his numerous crabbing trips, I had but to make known my desire; and you may be sure I acquainted Captain Lester, for such I found his name to be, with the fact that I would go with him on the following day. Before I left the captain I had received my final orders to report to him by eight o'clock on the next morning, and his parting injunction was, "wear rubber boots and the warmest clothes you've got, for this ain't no half-rater race."

Next morning I reported on board at 7:50, and at eight we cast off and stood out into the bay, The wind was light and coming only in puffs from the north-west, but the general look of the sky betokened a blow before long, or to quote my skipper: "I guess we'll have a breeze of wind on the turn of the tide"

I soon found myself astride the wheel-box, in full command of the ship, and learned that my duties were to steer the ship, and whenever I felt cold to go below, smoke a pipe and drink coffee. The captain (ex-officio) was to do the "drudging," as all good bay-men call "dredging." Happily I was permitted to examine one of the dredges. They are made of wrought iron, the frame being of 1/2-inch rod. The dredge proper is a rake, consisting of fourteen teeth, about four inches long, and welded onto the flat base in spaces of two or two and a half inches. The frame is thus about three feet wide. Back of the rake is another frame, say three feet wide and eighteen inches deep, bolted to the base of the rake at the two ends. A strong net attaches to this frame and the base of the rake. The remainder of the dredge consists of another bar of half-inch iron, bolted at each end of the rake, and extending in front of it and at right angles to the teeth, and so bent as to form a loop in the center, say three and a half feet from the rake and net. Through this loop or eye the dragging line is rove, and made fast with an anchor bend. The other end of the drag is belayed to a ring on the boat's deck, or through a scupper-hole if more convenient. Thus, when the dredge is on bottom, whatever the rake stirs up lands in the net, and remains there when by the drag the dredge is hauled aboard.

The *Itakit* usually carried ten dredges, which gave two men just about all they

could do for a day's work. We soon reached the mud bottom, where the crabs "burrow" for warmth in winter, and Captain Lester sung out "hard-a-lee," and by the time I had the wheel rolled down he had six dredges over, and, in less time than the story takes, the mainsheet was let run, and with the jib trimmed fairly flat we started on our first "drift."

Of course I insisted upon pulling a dredge, and, "equally, of course," the skipper advised to the contrary, but my assurance of plenty of muscle and nerve won the cause for me. When the dredges had been overboard about two minutes Captain Lester went forward, and by his orders, as soon as he commenced hauling the forward dredge, I hauled the one on the weather quarter. It was blowing a good full-sail breeze now, and as the sloop easily slipped through the water, the hundred odd pounds of dredge and dredged made me exceedingly happy that I had not exaggerated my strength.

My first haul consisted of a great quantity of mud, seaweed and an old shoe, a pint flask of salt water, a live flat-fish, two scallops, a "Little Neck" clam and nine beautiful crabs.

I had better say right here that the crabbers move in fleets. Everybody knows everybody else. In these early morning hours all the men are as happy as schoolboys. Jokes are bandied about, all the popular songs are sung, and sometimes very well; one fellow whom they call Larry, has an excellent tenor voice.

When I pulled my first dredge I believe that all other operations in the fleet ceased, and that all eyes were turned on me. "Hello, Les," cried one deep bass voice, "where did you catch that?" (I was "that.") "Does that kind come very high?" cried another. I smiled complacently and thought that perhaps I could do my share with any of them at any time; but when I had hauled my dredge aboard and attempted to dump it on deck, I am sure that all the male inhabitants of Long Island united in one great howl of derision. But I dumped it—by proxy. After three or four hauls I succeeded in acquiring the proper twist of the wrist, and then the crowd stopped laughing and became very friendly, and I found them a fine set of men, too.

Our first "drift" netted us one and a half barrels, about three hundred crabs, and "Les" (I had now dropped the captain) said this was a great run, so he jammed the push-pole into the soft bottom and left it there to mark the spot. As soon as we struck "all trash and no crabs," we went hard-a-lee again, and stood off to the other end of the "farm." At about eleven o'clock we caught the full force of a winter's squall right out of the west-nor'west. Of course, I was at once for reefing, but "Les" said: "Oh! no, this old gal's a 'teeterer,' and we'll make them reef first, if we carry away the stick"—and "they" reefed.

We finished our drift, and then double-reefed mainsail and bobbed jib, and went at them again. We ate our luncheon between hauls, and kept up work until shortly after one o'clock, then stood in for home. When we reached the dock we had twelve barrels of crabs, all headed and tagged; these we immediately put ashore, and within fifteen minutes after our arrival they were on an express wagon and started for Fulton Fish Market.

Then "Les" scrubbed down decks; this finished we harbor-furled sails, coiled down cables and drags, and went below for coffee and a pipe.

That evening I did not eat a very hearty dinner. I retired and went to sleep at seven-thirty, and slept through until eight the next morning. As soon as I opened my eyes I stared about to see just where I was, for during those

sleeping hours I must have caught more crabs than ever were born. I sailed a large sloop alone; this was easy enough except for the huge, square topsail and flat-headed balloon-jib, which troubled me greatly whenever "she went in stays." Then, too, the crabs climbed the rigging, and thousands of them spiked me, utterly ruining my new rubber boots. Then they laughed at me, and waved their innumerable claws in the most insulting manner, and it seemed as though one deep-voiced brute kept saying, "Where did you catch him, 'Les'?"

But when I was fairly awake I found I could scarcely move. I never before knew how many muscles I really had, and never imagined any of them could be so soft; every inch of my body was racked with torturing pains. But I had been "crabbing," and felt the game well worth the candle.

I have been crabbing several times now with "Les," and among the fraternity I am considered a "good thing," for my particular dredges seem to catch more crabs and less trash than any of the others, I like the experience and the unusual exercise in the bracing wintry air because I crab for fun; but I can say with a clear conscience that men who work, often in open boats, when the northwinds blow three-reefers, and when every drop of spray becomes a lump of ice before it strikes the deck, such men, I say, deserve far more than the paltry two dollars, which often is all they make for hours of back-breaking, rheumatism-breeding toil.

