

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE FLYING CLOUD ANCHORS OFF THE MARQUESAS—A PARTY FROM THE SCHOONER GO ASHORE—THE SCENERY OF THE KEYS AND INNER BAY—THE GRAINING—ONE OF THE PARTY DEVoured BY A SHARK.



IN the evening of the second day after sailing from Havana, we arrived off the Marquesas, and came to anchor for the night, intending to run into Key West on the following morning. The Marquesas Keys are a group of small islands lying to the westward of Key West. They are the westernmost group of Keys, except the Tortugas. The group consists of numerous islands, with only slight intervals between them, sweeping around in a gradual curve, thus enclosing a land-locked and shallow bay, studded with little tufts of islands rising out of its shallow waters. Beneath these waters, narrow and deep channels run in various directions, and connect with the straits separating the encircling land.

When day broke we found ourselves becalmed. We were only about fifteen miles from Key West, and lying in the Reef-Channel. As the island of Key West was indistinctly visible although the town of Key West could not be discerned, we felt as if we had almost arrived at our destination. Meanwhile, there were no signs of a breeze, and as it would not probably rise until the sun became considerably higher, three of the men, about an hour after daylight, came aft, and asked the captain for the use of the schooner's boat, for the purpose of going ashore and having some sport. The captain, after a glance around the horizon, gave the men permission to go, cautioning them to be on the lookout, and return the very moment that the breeze sprang up. Turning to me, he said,

"How would you like to go? I shall not need you, now that I've had breakfast."

I was very glad to receive permission, and after requesting and obtaining leave to take Jack, who had become very sociable with me, I started with the party, which was composed of the Englishman, the Norwegian, and one of the Conchs. When we came within fifty yards of the shore, Jack jumped overboard, despite our endeavors to hold him, and swam for the beach. The men were afraid that

he might be devoured by the sharks, but he reached the shore in safety, and long before we had landed, he was tearing up and down the beach, thrusting his muzzle into the water along the edge, and rending the air with barks and howls of delight. The wildest thing in nature is a dog just released from ship-board, and landed on a long, smooth beach. Poor Jack was frantic with joy, and it was some minutes after we had landed, before he sobered down into a mood of quiet enjoyment, in which he gambolled ponderously around us, while, with panting sides and protruding tongue, he regained his exhausted breath.

Near the mouth of one of the straits which divide the Keys, we fastened our boat, by its painter, to a stake of drift wood thrust into the beach. We then strolled off along the outside shore to the end of the Key on which we had landed, and came back to our starting-point.

Not a breath of air was stirring yet, as we distinctly perceived by a glance at the schooner's pennant, which trailed down the main-mast, without the slightest flutter.

"What do you say, boys, to a trip inside of the Keys?" inquired the Conch, who formed one of the party. "We can see the schooner's top-masts over the trees, and if a breeze springs up, we'll be out and aboard in a jiffy. There's

always lots of fish feeding inside, and I've brought the grains along, and we may come across something."

"I'm agreeable, for one," answered Bill Ruggles, the Englishman. "What do you expect to strike?"

"Oh! any thing we come across, that's fit to eat," said the Conch, whose name was John Linden. "Hurry up, we may not have more than a few minutes longer on shore. The wind scarcely ever keeps down beyond nine o'clock, and it's eight now.

As Ruggles disengaged the knot of the painter from the stake around which it passed, we jumped into the boat, which he shoved astern, and heading her bow towards the inlet, shot her fairly into it, and springing into the stern-sheets as she passed, he took the tiller, and the two other men put out the oars.

The channel leading into the bay between these two Keys was quite deep, and not more than fifty yards in width. The men had not rowed more than as many yards, before the boat passed the slender line of Keys which enclosed the bay, and we found ourselves in the land-locked waters which I have described.

With the exception of the channels which traversed the bay in several directions, the water was evidently very shoal. Silence reigned

supreme. Except, at intervals, the discordant cry of some wild bird, and the noise made by our party, every thing was still. These occasional noises only served to heighten the effect, as an indifferent light is said to render darkness visible. So completely shut in from the ocean was this little lake, that, even in a gale, its surface must have been all but unruffled.

"Hollo!" exclaimed John Linden, as he looked over his shoulder, while he tugged away at the bow-oar, "I see a rippling, 'way ahead; who's to get the grains ready and strike?"

"You, I suppose, you're the best hand at that," replied Ruggles. "Who ever heard of any body's using the grains when there's a Conch aboard?"

"All right, but I can't strike and row too. What kind of a hand are you at an oar, Fred?" said he, addressing me. "Can you pull?"

"I never tried, I said, "but I'm willing," I added, "to do my best."

"Never tried, but you think you can!" said Ruggles, grinning. "That's like the Irishman and the fiddle. He had n't ever tried to play, so he did n't know but he could."

"It's lucky Brady is aboard the schooner, or you'd have a spat with him about making jokes on Irishmen," observed Linden. "Do n't waste any more time with your chaff. You

come and take my oar, for we're gaining on those fish, whatever they are. You can let the youngster steer. You can steer, I suppose, can't you?" said he, again addressing me.

Being more confident of my steering powers than of my rowing ones, as green-hands about a boat usually are, I said that I could steer.

"Well," said Linden, "there's no help for it; we want a good strong oar, so you take mine, Bill, and let him take the helm. I do n't intend to trust much to your steering, though, Fred. Jest recollect this, when I say starboard,—starboard, keep putting your helm more and more down that way, to your right, and when I say port,—port, keep putting it more and more t' other way."

Bill Ruggles stepped over a couple of thwarts, and took the oar which the Conch relinquished, and the latter pulled out his grains and adjusted them on the end of a pole. Meanwhile, I kept repeating to myself, starboard goes this way, port goes that way; for although by the time I had reached Havana, I considered that I was able to steer pretty well, I felt somewhat doubtful when I found the duty suddenly devolve upon me, with doubts clearly expressed as to my ability.

The grains are of iron, consisting of a socket

joining a two-pronged fork with barbed points. A stout line, about the size of that generally used for hanging out clothes to dry, is made fast at the junction of the socket and prongs. The end of a pole of about twelve feet in length is then placed in the socket, and the line is led up along it, and kept taut, so as to hold the grains securely in position. The other end of the line is made fast in the bow of the boat, and the slack coiled all ready to pay out as rapidly as required. The man who strikes, stands in the bow, and poises the pole in both hands, and, if necessary, throws it several yards with unerring precision.

By the time that the arrangements for striking were completed, we were within a hundred yards of the fish which had attracted our attention. They were a great school of mullet. They were flashing through the water, and leaping out of it by hundreds, as if terrified by some enemy.

"Starboard," cried Linden, starboard, starboard, more yet,—hard a-starboard; let's take that channel. Now steer for that tall tree on the little island ahead. By gracious, boys, I see what's the matter with them mullet; it's the biggest kind of a white-shark fishing for them, as I'm a sinner."

"Can't you strike him," I eagerly exclaimed.

"Strike him," said Linden, "why we have got a line that would n't hold him easier than a stran' o' silk. He's off anyhow. He's taken that other channel. Jest look at them mullet! By gracious, he's taking in provisions for a month. It seems to me that we'd better be thinking of going back, so as to be within hail. If the wind should spring up, the captain will want to be off in less than no time. Head your boat the other way, Fred; you can see the channel plain enough between the mud-flats under water."

I did as I was told, and the boat had barely reversed her course, when I observed a motion in the water about fifty yards ahead.

"There's something," I shouted to the Conch, who was just taking his grains off the pole.

"Sure enough, so there is," he replied, re-adjusting the grains, and resuming his station. "Confound it, it's nothing but a big saw-fish!"

I stood up in the stern-sheets, and I could see a huge animal slowly swimming along in the same direction as the one which we were pursuing. It appeared so sluggish in its movements, that I felt sure of our being able to capture it, so I begged Linden to give us some sport. He said that we would lose our grains if we attempted to strike it. But I was too much excited to be reasonable. I had



never seen a fish harpooned, and I felt sure, too, that the Conch did not really think that we would lose our grains, but did not wish to strike the fish, because it was unfit to eat.

"Do strike it," I urged. "If you lose the grains, I'll get you another pair when we arrive at Key West."

"Well! here goes," he said, and with that he plunged the grains into the fish, which, by that time, was almost under the bow of our boat. "Port! port!" he shouted, as the line spun out, "pull men, and let's get more way on the boat."

The line whizzed out like lightning, and the men gave way with a will. Just as the full extent of the line paid out, jerk it went, as if it would break, and the boat rushed rapidly through the water.

"Steady, Fred," shouted the Conch; "keep her head with the line. If you keep her off, it'll part."

"Aye! aye!" said I, feeling quite nautical, and using a seaman's answer to correspond with my dignity as steersman.

The boat rushed along with surprising velocity, the water boiling around her bow. I stood up for a better view. I saw that the line was very tense. Now and then, near the bow, it whipped on the surface of the water



“ ‘ PORT! PORT!’ HE SHOUTED, AS THE LINE SPUN OUT.” — *Page 84*



and then clove through it, indicating that the fish swam at various depths. Suddenly the Conch shouted in a hurried manner,

“Keep away from the starboard bank. There’s a channel on the starboard side, leading right off our course.”

Without comprehending why I was ordered to do so, I put the tiller hard a-starboard, so as to keep over towards the bank on our port bow. I had hardly had time to shift the helm, when the boat careened, and “fetched up” on the mud-flat, which was only about two feet under water. Over it she went for ten or fifteen yards, stirring up the mud, and spirting the water all over us. Suddenly snap went the line, and the boat stopped plumb. I had scarcely breath to ejaculate,

“Is the line broken?”

“Parted, sure enough!” said Linden. “We’ve lost our grains. A line of that size can’t hold all creation. It was stronger though than I thought for. If it had n’t been the saw-fish took that channel, and hauled us on the bank, the line would n’t have parted after all.”

When the boat stopped, the men sprang to their feet, and laughed and shouted at the mishap, while around about the startled sea-birds wheeled with shriller cry, and winged their flight farther from the boisterous merri-

ment. After many relapses into fits of laughter, the men at last regained their sobriety.

"Better luck next time," said Linden, and with that he commenced with his oar to shove the boat off into the channel, adding, "but you need a harpoon, and a heavier line for that sort of work. When we get up the Reef, I'll show you some sport."

The cause of our losing the fish was that it suddenly entered another channel, which ran off nearly at a right angle with the course which we were steering. The consequence was, that as the boat had some scope of line out, the fish was well up the new channel while we were still in the old one. So instead of being able to enter the mouth of the former, we were forcibly dragged by a short cut on top of the bank which divided the channels. Here the line, which had scarcely been able to bear the strain when the boat was in deep water, broke, and she rested on top of the bank, in shallow water in which she was not quite afloat.

Afloat once more in the main channel which we had left, the men resumed their oars, and, with now and then a laugh and a sally of fun, headed the boat again towards the inlet. When we reached the inlet, we saw that outside there was a dead calm, and not a soul stirring on the deck of the schooner.

"I move we wait here," suggested Bill Ruggles. "We're not wanted aboard, and what's the use of going off until we're obliged to?"

Nobody gainsaying this proposition, we determined to wait until the wind came up, or the captain made a signal to us. The painter was once more passed over the stake on the beach, and we amused ourselves by rambling off into the mangroves. We certainly had not been absent more than ten minutes, when, on emerging from the woods to return towards the boat, we saw that she was adrift. On reaching the stake, we found that it must have become loosened by using it for mooring the boat. The eddy caused by the tide's flowing into the inlet, had carried the boat out from shore, from which, by tugging, she must have withdrawn the stake, and drifted off still farther. She was now about fifty yards from shore.

"By gracious, but the captain will be mad," said Bill Ruggles. "Have any of you got a line about you? If you have, I'll put a rock on it, and throw it aboard the boat and haul her in."

No one had a string over a yard long, and there we stood looking at the boat floating quietly out of reach.

"Standing here doing nothing won't fetch

her ashore, observed the Norwegian. "I'll strip and swim for her."

"No you won't" answered Linden. "Are you fool enough to go in swimming off one of these inlets, where sharks are coming in and going out, 'specially when the tide's rising? Did n't I say that was a white-shark I saw in the bay?"

"Well, suppose it was," replied the Norwegian, "I'm a good swimmer, and I have n't got above fifty yards to swim, and—you can't keep me now, here goes, clothes and all."

With that, before any one could frustrate his intention, he sprang into the water, and struck out for the boat. He was, as he had said, a good swimmer, and he had not proceeded more than half the distance to the boat, when we cheered him. As we did so, a dull splash sounded in the inlet beside us. Looking in that direction, we saw the dorsal fin and part of the back of a great white-shark. Startled at our voices, it had given a sudden flirt in the water, and now held on its course straight out of the inlet.

Paralyzed for a moment, no one spoke. Then every one shouted, Shark! shark! shark! Swim for your life!

The Norwegian gave one glance over his

shoulder, and struck out frantically for the boat. We held our breath in suspense.

At that instant, the huge fish seemed animated with a sudden perception. Instantaneously its dorsal fin disappeared below the surface of the water.

We glanced at the swimmer and the boat. The Norwegian's efforts were nerved with desperation. He was within six yards of the boat. In a moment more, his hands were grasping her gunwale. But suddenly throwing up his arms, he fell backward and submerged in the sea. A thrill of horror ran through us. The boat rocked with the tumultuous agitation of the waters on which she floated. Our blanched faces turned on each other, as, with one accord, we exclaimed, My God!