

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BOATING PARTY LAND—A MISHAP BEFALLS DENNIS BRADY—HE SPEEDILY RECOVERS—RUGGLES AMONG THE CORMORANTS AND PELICANS—THE PARTY CAPTURE A JEW-FISH—TURLING POSTPONED.



T had been blowing a pretty stiff breeze since early in the morning, and as there was some surf beating on the beach of the Key on which we landed, the men jumped out of the boat, and ran her high and dry ashore.

Brady had hardly leaped into the water, from his side of the boat, when he gave a cry of pain, let go of the boat, and hopped and hobbled to the nearest place out of reach of the surf, where he seated himself, and writhed about, uttering moans of distress.

We quitted the boat, and ran to his assistance.

“Howly Moses! Howly Moses!” roared

Brady, "I'm kilt entirely." Hereupon, he rolled over and over in a series of contortions accompanied with cries of "Howly Moses."

"He's trod on one of them sea-urchins," said Ruggles. "I've told him afore that he'd ketch it some of these times, if he jumped out of the boat barefooted. Here, Brady, my boy, hold still a bit, and I'll take the spines out with my jack-knife."

But Brady continued his cries and contortions, and went on as if he was mad.

"Brady," remonstrated Ruggles, "you'd better let me pick the spines out: jest be quiet a minute. The longer they stay in, the worse it'll be for you, and your foot'll swell up the size of two."

At this, Brady seemed to return sufficiently to his senses to be able to keep still, and hold out the sole of his foot, which was bleeding and quivering with pain. Ruggles knelt down beside him, and commenced to pick at the flesh with his jack-knife. In a few seconds he removed a blackish splinter, as sharp as a needle, and then another, and another.

"Here, one of you," said he, "wet a handkerchief, a piece of shirt, or any thing you've got about you, so I can wash the sand and blood away."

One of the men brought a dripping handker-

chief, and the sole of Brady's foot, on being washed, exhibited about a dozen black marks where the spines had penetrated. Ruggles now proceeded adroitly, and soon extracted the rest of the spines, although he was often interrupted by the wincing of Brady, who continued to ejaculate, "Howly Moses!"

"Now they 're all out," said Ruggles, gently washing the foot again, and depositing the heel on a flat piece of coral ledge, so that the sand could not get into the incisions in the sole, "and I hope you 've larnt a lesson about jumping out of the boat barefooted. Them urchins is thick around here."

"An' faix, an' is it urchins ye call 'em," said Brady, recovering his tongue; "but it's the quare name they has! In Ireland, it's the little byes as is urchins. The things in me fut is the divil's own byes, bedad!"

"Why, don't you have sea-urchins in Ireland?" said Ruggles, maliciously, seeing that Brady was getting over his pain. "I thought you had every thing in Ireland."

"And there's where ye're right," replied Brady, not disposed to acknowledge that Ireland was deficient in any thing. "Barring snakes and toads, that Sint Pathrick druv away, there's nothing we have n't in the ould counthry. But, for a moment, I jest disremimbered

the sea-urchins. In Ireland they grow to a wontherful size. On me ooncle's eshtate that raches to the say-shore, he once had a line of thim set, jest to keep smugglers from landin' at night."

"Now, Brady," said Ruggles, "quit that. I believe what you got jest now was a punishment for the whopper you told in the boat, and here you're at it again."

"A whopper, was it, indade," said Brady, "bedad, if you stuck to the thruth yourself, you would n't be afther thinking other people did n't tell it."

"Well, it's more'n I can do to believe some of your yarns," said Ruggles. "I say, if Ireland's such a fine country as you make it out, why do so many of you leave it?"

"Why do we lave it: and it's aisy to answer that. We've got a duty to perfform, to spread ceevilization in the worruld, and carry instruction to haythens like you."

"You've got it, Bill," shouted the men. "He's too much for you!"

"But it's obleeged to ye I be for docthering me fut, and no offince," said Brady, rising, and hobbling to the boat to get his shoes and stockings.

"Now, boys," said Linden, "what did we come here for? There's no game about here.

Let's go back of the Keys, on the flats, and see if we can't find something to strike."

"Hold a bit," said Ruggles, "I know what *I* want to do. I've been wanting for some time to get a pelican's pouch to hold my smoking tobacco, and I'm going through the mangroves to a place where I know I can get a shot at a pelican."

"I'm off now," continued Ruggles. "The place is jest 'round the north end of the Key. I'll walk along the outside beach until I get near the place, and then I'll work through the mangroves, until I come in sight of the birds. You'd better launch the boat, and keep along the beach; but don't keep out too far from shore, or the birds'll see you, and I won't be able to get a crack at them. As soon as you hear me fire, you can pull away, and if my bird's dropped in the water, you'll be able to get it for me. I only want one: but I reckon I'll take both muskets along, so if I miss the first shot, I'll have another one."

Ruggles and I walked along the beach for about half a mile, and, as we neared the end of the Key, we turned into the mangroves, and, with much difficulty, made our way among their roots. After going about a hundred yards, and slipping and stumbling around through the dense growth standing in water,—for the back part of

the Key was below the level of the sea,—we began to distinguish the edge of the mangroves. Ruggles crept cautiously forward, and I followed him until we got very near to the edge, and then moving a little towards one side, we came opposite to a slight opening, which proved to be a long and shallow inlet leading out to the waters back of the Key.

“Hist!” said he, “do’n’t make any noise.”

I advanced cautiously to the place where he was standing, and thence I could see, through the opening, a little Key which was not more than forty yards off. In the branches of its mangroves, there were multitudes of pelicans and cormorants. They did not seem to be aware of our presence, and rested on the limbs of the trees, as if with a sense of perfect security. The pelicans had a peculiarly grave and ancient appearance, and they and the cormorants seemed to be on excellent terms. The leaves of the mangroves, and the trunks of the trees were whitened with the droppings of the birds, for this was one of their favorite resorts.

“Shall I pop over that old grand-daddy of a pelican,” whispered Ruggles, designating, with the muzzle of his musket, a very patriarchal-looking individual. He had hardly spoken before the stroke of oars was heard. The

wings of the birds all lifted simultaneously, and they arose in a cloud.

"No time for picking out a bird now," said Ruggles, aiming at the nearest pelican.

Bang, went the gun, and the pelican fell dead in the water, and the other pelicans flew rapidly away. Not so with the cormorants, however, for they continued to stupidly flap about in the air, hovering over the dead pelican, and sometimes descending to take a look at it, and then flying away a short distance, only to return. The temptation was too much for Ruggles, who seized my musket just as a cormorant was returning for another look, and shot it within three yards of the spot where the pelican lay on the surface of the water.

"There!" said Ruggles, "I hope you're satisfied now! You was so curious about it, I thought I'd let you see how it felt. That's not what I did it for, though, Fred: I was only joking. What I shot him was for to see if the things can be made fit to eat. I've tried 'em, and could n't eat 'em, but Hannibal says they was n't fixed right, because the rank part's the skin, and it ought to be took off; so I promised I'd fetch him one some time, and let him show what kind of a fist he'd make at cooking of it."

The sound of the approaching boat grew more distinct, but we kept along shore so as

to get to the beach, because it would have been impossible for the men to force the boat through the mangroves to the place where we were standing, and if we had gone to the edge of the mangroves, we would have been up to our waists in water. After going a short distance, Bill Ruggles sang out,

“Boat ahoy!”

The sound of the oars ceased, and Ruggles shouted again,

“You’ll find two birds in the water, abreast of the roost. You’ll have to come back to the nearest point on the beach for us, there’s no getting out to the edge of the mangroves here.”

“Aye! aye!” was answered from the boat, which we could not see on account of the dense growth, and the stroke of the oars recommenced as we resumed our way towards the beach. As soon as we reached that place, we took our shoes off, and wrung out our stockings, for the water among the mangroves had sometimes been over ankle-deep. The men in the boat soon landed near us, having found the birds without difficulty. The pelican turned out to be a large one, with a very fine pouch, which contained a fish. Bill Ruggles took the fish out, and then separated the pelican’s pouch from its lower bill. Brady commenced to pluck

the cormorant, saying that it was the only thing he'd have to do with it, "the rest might ate it and wilcome."

"What kept you so long?" said Deal, "we thought something must have happened to you."

"Something did happen to us," said Ruggles: "we missed our way. But you oughtn't to have come around the point until you heard me fire. You came very near making me lose the birds. If you'd come a few seconds earlier, they'd have been off."

"We gave you plenty of time, Bill," replied Deal. "A pelican pouch may be worth a heap to you, but there's no use of spending all the afternoon getting it, 'specially when I know where we'd be pretty sure to find something worth having. There's apt to be turtle back of this Key. I know the place well. I was once on this station in the wrecker *Susan Day*. Jest back of here, about a quarter of a mile, there's some holes in the mud-flats, where I scarcely ever missed finding turtle."

"Well, boys," said Ruggles, "I'm very sorry if I've been a-keeping of you from going there, but you've only got to say the word, and we'll go there now. There's plenty of time. I don't believe it's more'n three o'clock. What would you say it was by the sun? Hold!

Fred has a watch. What time is it by your watch, Fred?"

"Lots of time," said Ruggles in reply to my announcement of the time, "we sha' n't have to go off to the schooner until near dark. Come, let's start: be lively, Tom, you were in a big hurry jest now."

The men put out their oars, and were rowing slowly along the southern edge of the inlet, and almost touching the mangroves with the tips of the port oars, when Linden stopped rowing, and held up one hand.

"Did you hear that, Tom,?" said he, addressing the other Conch, while we all listened to hear the noise to which he alluded.

"No," said Deal, "I did n't. What was it?"

"I'm certain I heard a jew-fish," resumed Linden. "Get out the grains, Tom, you've got the bow oar. Jest slip your oar in gently, and put the grains on the pole. They're ready in the bow, with the line made fast. There it is again, do 'nt you hear that?"

At long intervals, a noise under water, like the sound of a muffled drum, reached our ears. Boom—boom—boom, it went. The men kept perfectly still, and not an oar was dipped into the water, while Deal skilfully unshipped his oar, and stepped lightly into the bow of the

boat, as he drew the pole after him, and at the same time adjusted the grains.

"I should judge it must be as much as fifty yards off," said Deal. "Don't make any noise."

Boom—boom—boom—boom, again went the jew-fish.

"Give the boat the least bit of head-way," said Deal, turning slightly around, and speaking to Linden and Brady: "and you, Bill, steer as you see my grains point."

I left my seat by the side of Ruggles, and crawled cautiously forward, until I could crouch down in the boat, behind the place where Deal was standing high up in the bow, and balancing his grains with the most perfect address. The bow had a stout grating set into it, about six inches below the gunwale of the boat, so that Deal was enabled to stand in a very commanding position. I peered into the water, which was so limpid that I could distinguish old roots and shells lying on the bottom, and once in a while, we heard the jew-fish repeat the monotonous boom—boom.

The men gave the boat only enough motion for steerage-way, barely touching the blades of the oars in the water. Suddenly, I saw the grains pointed in a certain direction, as a gesture from Deal, and a half turn of his head

towards Ruggles, showed that he had discovered the jew-fish. I strove to penetrate the obscurity of the water in that direction, but my face was just above the gunwale of the boat, and I looked through the water at an acute angle, whereas Deal had the great advantage of looking from an elevation which increased the angle made by the line of vision with the surface of the water. But more than all, Deal had the advantage of a practised eye; and we had rowed three or four yards before I could distinguish the fish as it lay in the water under the overhanging boughs of mangroves.

It was perfectly still, except the movement of its fins and tail, and lay just within the shadow of a tree, with its snout almost touching the line in the water between sun-light and shade. The water was at least five feet deep, and at the shortest distance to which we dared approach, it would have been impossible to strike the fish by throwing the pole like a dart. So Deal made a motion to the men to rest on their oars, and quietly dipping the grains below the surface of the water, he gradually extended the pole until the points of the grains were within six feet of the fish, and then, with a rapid shove, he transfixed it.

Instantly, a tremendous splashing ensued, and

the fish was darting away, when Deal took a turn of the line around a cleat in the bow of the boat. This proceeding nearly caused the loss of the fish, for it was very large, and the grains were not so secure that its powerful efforts to escape would not have eventually disengaged the tormenting irons. At last, it seemed on the very eve of breaking away, when Deal,—doing what would have occurred to no one but a Conch, or, certainly, what no one but a Conch could have done well,—jumped into the water, which was up to his arm-pits, and ducking below the surface, bestraddled the fish, and, at the same time, thrust each of his hands through its gills. In this position, he appeared above the surface, managing the fish as if it had been a restive horse. At one moment, he had it under control, and at the next, it would make a desperate effort, and carry his head below the surface of the water. If they had been left to fight it out in single combat, the jew-fish's chance of escape would have been quite as good as the Conch's chance of preventing it. But Linden jumped into the water, and grappled with the fish, and, by the united exertions of the two men, they managed to hoist it into the boat, where it thrashed around as if it would stave every thing to pieces.

The capture of the fish was thought to be a sufficiently good piece of luck to serve for the afternoon's sport, so it was decided to defer the turtling until another occasion, in order to have plenty of time to visit all the holes where Deal had stated that he was certain to find turtle. The men thought that if they started on the expedition now, it was so late that they might be chasing a turtle when the time came to go aboard of the *Flying Cloud*, in which case, they would be obliged to desist from the pursuit. All hands agreeing to put off the excursion until another occasion, the boat was turned towards the outer mouth of the inlet, and the men pulled towards the schooner.

When we came along-side, the jew-fish, as the most distinguished passenger, was passed aboard of the schooner, and received by Hannibal and one of the crew, with many expressions of admiration.

"You hab had luck," said the ever-grinning African. "Jest right size, too, 'zactly, precise. I reckon he's not over seventy-five, is he? When dey's over a hundred, dey's pretty coarse fish, but smaller size is very nice indeed, very nice indeed."

"And the way he was cotched, was a caution, cook," said Brady, as he came lamely up the side of the schooner. "It's the first time in

me life, this blessed afternoon, that I seen a fush
rid, barring the little marble byes, widout
any clothes on, that sits a-top o' dolphins
unthrer fountains. But it's me belafe
thim Conchs could live in the wather with
aise."