

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FLYING CLOUD INSPECTS THE REEF—
CAPTAIN BOWERS SENDS THE MEN ASHORE
FOR WOOD—BRADY HAS BAD LUCK AGAIN.



HE next morning, at daylight, the schooner's sails were set, her anchor weighed, and she sailed up the Reef, until we sighted the wrecker approaching from the next station. Then she sailed down the Reef, passing her anchorage, and continuing her course until we sighted the wrecking sloop, which was under way from the station in that direction. Then the course was reversed for the second time, and she returned to her anchorage, after having been under way for five or six hours.

This was the daily mode of procedure, but it was not invariable. The object of the wreckers is to survey the Reef, daily, throughout its whole extent; and the only test which can be afforded that it is effectually accomplished, is by

sighting each other in both directions, and thus they see that there is no wreck in the intervening space.

On the morning of which I spoke, when we came to anchor, furlled the sails, coiled away ropes, and got every thing in good order, it was between twelve and one o'clock, and we took dinner. Soon after it was over, the captain ordered the men to lower away one of the quarter-boats, and go ashore to cut wood for the schooner. Probably seeing my wistful look towards the preparations, he said,

"If you want to go, you can go, Fred,—that is, if you have got through with your duties."

"I have nothing to do, sir," I answered; "unless you have something particular that you wish done."

"No," said he, "nothing. If you've finished your regular duties, be off with you."

The men, having provided themselves with axes and a keg of drinking water, placed them in the quarter-boat used for the purpose of wooding, and then lowered her from the davits. Jack was immediately seized with an anxious wagging of his tail, accompanied with alternate prostrations and gambols, in the midst of which he was gratified by being deposited in the boat.

The crew of the boat consisted of Ruggles, Brady, Linden, Deal, and another Conch, and, as she pulled five oars, each man took an oar, and I occupied the stern-sheets, and steered for a point to which I was directed to head. The men gave way with a will, and in the course of fifteen minutes we landed on a Key a little over a mile distant from the schooner.

One of the party was left in charge of the boat, and the rest proceeded into the thicket, which soon rang with the quickly descending strokes of the axe. Ruggles, Linden, Deal, and Brady, composed the party of woodmen. While the first three men were engaged in cutting down trees, Brady was employed in lopping off the branches and twigs of those which had been felled. The party worked steadily for about half an hour, and began to feel so much heated with their exertions, as to wish for the water that had been left in the boat. Accordingly, I was despatched to help the boat-tender to carry the little keg to the place where the men were at work.

We soon returned with the keg, and the men drank the water greedily. The afternoon was sultry, and, in the midst of the mangroves, where not a breath of air stirred, the heat was intense.

"It's so moighty warrum in here," observed Brady, "I think I'll take off me shirrut before I do any more chapping."

"You'll be stung by mosquitoes, if you do," said Linden, as he observed Brady stripping off his woollen shirt, and tightening the leathern strap around his waist.

"The muskatees isn't so bad as the hate," replied Brady, placing his shirt on the fallen trunk of a tree, and seating himself on it, as he hauled a branch towards him, and commenced to trim off the twigs. "And I've a notion, byes, to try the plan a naygur once told me was good for muskatees."

"What was that, Brady?" said Linden, picking up his axe, and taking an occasional chop at a neighboring tree.

"Jest what you see," said Brady, "nothin' shorter, to sit in me buff. I wunst landed on one of thim Kays to the southward, and I see a naygur wid his pants strapped 'round his waist, and widout a rag of a shirrut. I says, 'ain't ye afeard to go that way for the muskatees.' 'No, indade,' he says, 'for this way they can't get a good holdt o' me.'"

"You wait till sundown dressed that fashion," said Ruggles, "and they'll leave so little of you, they'll have nothing to take hold on, sure enough."

"Be me troth," replied Brady, "I've had enough exparience already, for I fale the var-mints stingin' me awful. I'll put on me shirrut widout any more loss o' time."

The woods once again resounded with the vigorous blows of the axemen, as Brady slowly arose, picked up his shirt, and pulled it over his head. As he slipped his arms into the sleeves, he uttered an exclamation, hurriedly tore the shirt off, and dashed it away from him into the bushes.

"What's up now," said Linden, dropping his axe, and walking up to Brady, as he stood rooted to the ground, and clasping one of his arms.

"The mather is I'm bit wid a scorpion; look at thut," said Brady, exposing the place where the scorpion had struck him, and which was already beginning to swell from the animal's venomous sting. "Murther, but it's the bad luck I have!"

"Be still, Brady," said Linden, "it hurts bad, but it is n't dangerous. I never knowed any one to die of it, 'cept an old woman in Key West, and the doctors didn't say positive. Put on your shirt, and we'll go right aboard and get some hartshorn from the captain's chest; that's the best thing for it."

The men had all desisted from their work

and grouped around Brady. His shirt was picked up and carefully inspected, and he had again pulled it over his head, and proceeded to about the same point in his dressing as in the former attempt, when he suddenly stopped, and tore it off as rapidly as before.

"It's bewutched! it's bewutched!" he shouted, as he threw it from him. "I'm bitten all over me chist and me arrums."

He was, indeed, stung very severely. The scorpion, or whatever it was, had managed to wound him in half a dozen places, during the short time that he was engaged in extricating himself from his shirt. A couple of the men started towards the boat with him, while the rest picked up the shirt and reëxamined it. The second inspection proved more successful than the first, for the scorpion was found in one of the folds of the shirt. One of the men speared it with the point of his knife, and I had an excellent opportunity of examining it as we walked towards the boat. This specimen of the animal was about six inches in length, including the tail, which was composed of several joints terminating in a sharp hook. The body is provided with a pair of crab-like claws, with which the animal seizes its prey.

As soon as we reached the shore, we got into

the boat, and put off towards the schooner, where we delivered Brady into the hands of the kind captain, who assured him that the stings, although numerous and painful, would not prove fatal, and led him away to the cabin, to undergo the usual treatment of hartshorn.

When we had committed Brady to the charge of the captain, we took another man in his place, and returned to the beach, to load the boat with the wood that had been cut. In the course of an hour, during which we each made several trips between the woods and the boat, we managed to stow her so full that she was almost gunwale deep in the water.

The sun had almost set by the time the men had unloaded their freight of wood, sawed or chopped it up, and thrown it into the hold of the schooner.

Every now and then one of them went to see how Brady was getting along. He had turned into his bunk, and, although suffering pain from the numerous stings of the scorpion, was not by any means in a dangerous condition. But like most of his countrymen of his class, under similar circumstances, he was despondent. It was useless to tell him that no one on the Reef had ever been known to die of the sting of a scorpion; his ready tongue always had some reply which he considered a reason. When

I tried to console him by this statement, he said:

“An’ sure, an’ thim as lives on the Rafe has got used to it, one bite at a time, but be the powers, I’ve got enough pison in me to kill an illiphant.”