

CHAPTER XLVIII

Something Under The Surface

Not to omit an occurrence of considerable interest, we must needs here present some account of a curious retinue of fish which overtook our Chamois, a day or two after parting with the canoe.

A violent creaming and frothing in our rear announced their approach. Soon we found ourselves the nucleus of an incredible multitude of finny creatures, mostly anonymous.

First, far in advance of our prow, swam the helmeted Silver-heads; side by side, in uniform ranks, like an army. Then came the Boneetas, with their flashing blue flanks. Then, like a third distinct regiment, wormed and twisted through the water like Archimedean screws, the quivering Wriggle-tails; followed in turn by the rank and file of the Trigger-fish--so called from their quaint dorsal fins being set in their backs with a comical curve, as if at half-cock. Far astern the rear was brought up by endless battalions of Yellow-backs, right martially vested in buff.

And slow sailing overhead were flights of birds; a wing in the air for every fin in the sea.

But let the sea-fowls fly on: turn we to the fish.

Their numbers were amazing; countless as the tears shed for perfidious lovers. Far abroad on both flanks, they swam in long lines, tier above tier; the water alive with their hosts. Locusts of the sea, peradventure, going to fall with a blight upon some green, mossy province of Neptune. And tame and fearless they were, as the first fish that swam in Euphrates; hardly evading the hand; insomuch that Samoa caught many without lure or line.

They formed a decorous escort; paddling along by our barnacled sides, as if they had been with us from the very beginning; neither scared by our craft's surging in the water; nor in the least sympathetic at losing a comrade by the hand of Samoa. They closed in their ranks and swam on.

How innocent, yet heartless they looked! Had a plank dropped out of our boat, we had sunk to the bottom; and belike, our cheerful retinue would have paid the last rites to our remains.

But still we kept company; as sociably as you please; Samoa helping himself when he listed, and Yillah clapping her hands as the radiant creatures, by a simultaneous turning round on their silvery bellies, caused the whole sea to glow like a burnished shield.

But what has befallen this poor little Boneeta astern, that he swims so toilingly on, with gills showing purple? What has he there, towing

behind? It is tangled sea-kelp clinging to its fins. But the clogged thing strains to keep up with its fellows. Yet little they heed. Away they go; every fish for itself, and any fish for Samoa.

At last the poor Boneeta is seen no more. The myriad fins swim on; a lonely waste, where the lost one drops behind.

Strange fish! All the live-long day, they were there by our side; and at night still tarried and shone; more crystal and scaly in the pale moonbeams, than in the golden glare of the sun.

How prettily they swim; all silver life; darting hither and thither between their long ranks, and touching their noses, and scraping acquaintance. No mourning they wear for the Boneeta left far astern; nor for those so cruelly killed by Samoa. No, no; all is glee, fishy glee, and frolicking fun; light hearts and light fins; gay backs and gay spirits.--Swim away, swim away! my merry fins all. Let us roam the flood; let us follow this monster fish with the barnacled sides; this strange-looking fish, so high out of water; that goes without fins. What fish can it be? What rippling is that? Dost hear the great monster breathe? Why, 'tis sharp at both ends; a tail either way; nor eyes has it any, nor mouth. What a curious fish! what a comical fish! But more comical far, those creatures above, on its hollow back, clinging thereto like the snaky eels, that cling and slide on the back of the Sword fish, our terrible foe. But what curious eels these are! Do they deem themselves pretty as we? No, no;

for sure, they behold our limber fins, our speckled and beautiful scales. Poor, powerless things! How they must wish they were we, that roam the flood, and scour the seas with a wish. Swim away; merry fins, swim away! Let him drop, that fellow that halts; make a lane; close in, and fill up. Let him drown, if he can not keep pace. No laggards for us:--

We fish, we fish, we merrily swim,
We care not for friend nor for foe:
Our fins are stout,
Our tails are out,
As through the seas we go.

Fish, Fish, we are fish with red gills;
Naught disturbs us, our blood is at zero:
We are buoyant because of our bags,
Being many, each fish is a hero.
We care not what is it, this life
That we follow, this phantom unknown:
To swim, it's exceedingly pleasant,--
So swim away, making a foam.
This strange looking thing by our side,
Not for safety, around it we flee:--
Its shadow's so shady, that's all,--
We only swim under its lee.
And as for the eels there above,

And as for the fowls in the air,
We care not for them nor their ways,
As we cheerily glide afar!

We fish, we fish, we merrily swim,
We care not for friend nor for foe:
Our fins are stout,
Our tails are out,
As through the seas we go.

But how now, my fine fish! what alarms your long ranks, and tosses them all into a hubbub of scales and of foam? Never mind that long knave with the spear there, astern. Pipe away, merry fish, and give us a stave or two more, keeping time with your doggerel tails. But no, no! their singing was over. Grim death, in the shape of a Chevalier, was after them.

How they changed their boastful tune! How they hugged the vilified boat! How they wished they were in it, the braggarts! And how they all tingled with fear!

For, now here, now there, is heard a terrific rushing sound under water, betokening the onslaught of the dread fish of prey, that with spear ever in rest, charges in upon the out-skirts of the shoal, transfixing the fish on his weapon. Re-treating and shaking them off, the Chevalier devours them; then returns to the charge.

Hugging the boat to desperation, the poor fish fairly crowded themselves up to the surface, and floundered upon each other, as men are lifted off their feet in a mob. They clung to us thus, out of a fancied security in our presence. Knowing this, we felt no little alarm for ourselves, dreading lest the Chevalier might despise our boat, full as much as his prey; and in pursuing the fish, run through the poor Chamois with a lunge. A jacket, rolled up, was kept in readiness to be thrust into the first opening made; while as the thousand fins audibly patted against our slender planks, we felt nervously enough; as if treading upon thin, crackling ice.

At length, to our no small delight, the enemy swam away; and again by our side merrily paddled our escort; ten times merrier than ever.