

## CHAPTER XC

### Rare Sport At Ohonoo

Approached from the northward, Ohonoo, midway cloven down to the sea, one half a level plain; the other, three mountain terraces--Ohonoo looks like the first steps of a gigantic way to the sun. And such, if Braid-Beard spoke truth, it had formerly been.

"Ere Mardi was made," said that true old chronicler, "Vivo, one of the genii, built a ladder of mountains whereby to go up and go down. And of this ladder, the island of Ohonoo was the base. But wandering here and there, incognito in a vapor, so much wickedness did Vivo spy out, that in high dudgeon he hurried up his ladder, knocking the mountains from under him as he went. These here and there fell into the lagoon, forming many isles, now green and luxuriant; which, with those sprouting from seeds dropped by a bird from the moon, comprise all the groups in the reef."

Surely, oh, surely, if I live till Mardi be forgotten by Mardi, I shall not forget the sight that greeted us, as we drew nigh the shores of this same island of Ohonoo; for was not all Ohonoo bathing in the surf of the sea?

But let the picture be painted.

Where eastward the ocean rolls surging against the outer reef of  
Mardi, there, facing a flood-gate in the barrier, stands cloven  
Ohonoo; her plains sloping outward to the sea, her mountains a  
bulwark behind. As at Juam, where the wild billows from seaward roll  
in upon its cliffs; much more at Ohonoo, in billowy battalions charge  
they hotly into the lagoon, and fall on the isle like an army  
from the deep. But charge they never so boldly, and charge they  
forever, old Ohonoo gallantly throws them back till all before her is  
one scud and rack. So charged the bright billows of cuirassiers at  
Waterloo: so hurled them off the long line of living walls, whose  
base was as the sea-beach, wreck-strown, in a gale.

Without the break in the reef wide banks of coral shelve off,  
creating the bar, where the waves muster for the onset, thundering in  
water-bolts, that shake the whole reef, till its very spray trembles.  
And then is it, that the swimmers of Ohonoo most delight to gambol in  
the surf.

For this sport, a surf-board is indispensable: some five feet in  
length; the width of a man's body; convex on both sides; highly  
polished; and rounded at the ends. It is held in high estimation;  
invariably oiled after use; and hung up conspicuously in the dwelling  
of the owner.

Ranged on the beach, the bathers, by hundreds dash in; and diving  
under the swells, make straight for the outer sea, pausing not till

the comparatively smooth expanse beyond has been gained. Here, throwing themselves upon their boards, tranquilly they wait for a billow that suits. Snatching them up, it hurries them landward, volume and speed both increasing, till it races along a watery wall, like the smooth, awful verge of Niagara. Hanging over this scroll, looking down from it as from a precipice, the bathers halloo; every limb in motion to preserve their place on the very crest of the wave. Should they fall behind, the squadrons that follow would overwhelm them; dismounted, and thrown forward, as certainly would they be run over by the steed they ride. 'Tis like charging at the head of cavalry: you must on.

An expert swimmer shifts his position on his plank; now half striding it; and anon, like a rider in the ring, poising himself upright in the scud, coming on like a man in the air.

At last all is lost in scud and vapor, as the overgrown billow bursts like a bomb. Adroitly emerging, the swimmers thread their way out; and like seals at the Orkneys, stand dripping upon the shore.

Landing in smooth water, some distance from the scene, we strolled forward; and meeting a group resting, inquired for Uhia, their king. He was pointed out in the foam. But presently drawing nigh, he embraced Media, bidding all welcome.

The bathing over, and evening at hand, Uhia and his subjects repaired

to their canoes; and we to ours.

Landing at another quarter of the island, we journeyed up a valley called Monlova, and were soon housed in a very pleasant retreat of our host.

Soon supper was spread. But though the viands were rare, and the red wine went round and round like a foaming bay horse in the ring; yet we marked, that despite the stimulus of his day's good sport, and the stimulus of his brave good cheer, Uhia our host was moody and still.

Said Babbalanja "My lord, he fills wine cups for others to quaff."

But whispered King Media, "Though Uhia be sad, be we merry, merry men."

And merry some were, and merrily went to their mats.