

CHAPTER XXIII

The north-west trade carried us almost into the south-east trade, and then left us for several days to roll and swelter in the doldrums.

During this time I have discovered that I have a genius for rifle-shooting. Mr. Pike swore I must have had long practice; and I confess I was myself startled by the ease of the thing. Of course, it's the knack; but one must be so made, I suppose, in order to be able to acquire the knack.

By the end of half an hour, standing on the heaving deck and shooting at bottles floating on the rolling swell, I found that I broke each bottle at the first shot. The supply of empty bottles giving out, Mr. Pike was so interested that he had the carpenter saw me a lot of small square blocks of hard wood. These were more satisfactory. A well-aimed shot threw them out of the water and spinning into the air, and I could use a single block until it had drifted out of range. In an hour's time I could, shooting quickly and at short range, empty my magazine at a block and hit it nine times, and, on occasion, ten times, out of eleven.

I might not have judged my aptitude as unusual, had I not induced Miss West and Wada to try their hands. Neither had luck like mine. I finally persuaded Mr. Pike, and he went behind the wheel-house so that none of the crew might see how poor a shot he was. He was never able to hit the

mark, and was guilty of the most ludicrous misses.

"I never could get the hang of rifle-shooting," he announced disgustedly, "but when it comes to close range with a gat I'm right there. I guess I might as well overhaul mine and limber it up."

He went below and came back with a huge '44 automatic pistol and a handful of loaded clips.

"Anywhere from right against the body up to ten or twelve feet away, holding for the stomach, it's astonishing, Mr. Pathurst, what you can do with a weapon like this. Now you can't use a rifle in a mix-up. I've been down and under, with a bunch giving me the boot, when I turned loose with this. Talk about damage! It ranged them the full length of their bodies. One of them'd just landed his brogans on my face when I let'm have it. The bullet entered just above his knee, smashed the collarbone, where it came out, and then clipped off an ear. I guess that bullet's still going. It took more than a full-sized man to stop it. So I say, give me a good handy gat when something's doing."

"Ain't you afraid you'll use all your ammunition up?" he asked anxiously half an hour later, as I continued to crack away with my new toy.

He was quite reassured when I told him Wada had brought along fifty thousand rounds for me.

In the midst of the shooting, two sharks came swimming around. They were quite large, Mr. Pike said, and he estimated their length at fifteen feet. It was Sunday morning, so that the crew, except for working the ship, had its time to itself, and soon the carpenter, with a rope for a fish-line and a great iron hook baited with a chunk of salt pork the size of my head, captured first one, and then the other, of the monsters. They were hoisted in on the main deck. And then I saw a spectacle of the cruelty of the sea.

The full crew gathered about with sheath knives, hatchets, clubs, and big butcher knives borrowed from the galley. I shall not give the details, save that they gloated and lusted, and roared and bellowed their delight in the atrocities they committed. Finally, the first of the two fish was thrown back into the ocean with a pointed stake thrust into its upper and lower jaws so that it could not close its mouth. Inevitable and prolonged starvation was the fate thus meted out to it.

"I'll show you something, boys," Andy Fay cried, as they prepared to handle the second shark.

The Maltese Cockney had been a most capable master of ceremonies with the first one. More than anything else, I think, was I hardened against these brutes by what I saw them do. In the end, the maltreated fish thrashed about the deck entirely eviscerated. Nothing remained but the mere flesh-shell of the creature, yet it would not die. It was amazing the life that lingered when all the vital organs were gone. But more

amazing things were to follow.

Mulligan Jacobs, his arms a butcher's to the elbows, without as much as "by your leave," suddenly thrust a hunk of meat into my hand. I sprang back, startled, and dropped it to the deck, while a gleeful howl went up from the two-score men. I was shamed, despite myself. These brutes held me in little respect; and, after all, human nature is so strange a compound that even a philosopher dislikes being held in disesteem by the brutes of his own species.

I looked at what I had dropped. It was the heart of the shark, and as I looked, there under my eyes, on the scorching deck where the pitch oozed from the seams, the heart pulsed with life.

And I dared. I would not permit these animals to laugh at any fastidiousness of mine. I stooped and picked up the heart, and while I concealed and conquered my qualms I held it in my hand and felt it beat in my hand.

At any rate, I had won a mild victory over Mulligan Jacobs; for he abandoned me for the more delectable diversion of torturing the shark that would not die. For several minutes it had been lying quite motionless. Mulligan Jacobs smote it a heavy blow on the nose with the flat of a hatchet, and as the thing galvanized into life and flung its body about the deck the little venomous man screamed in ecstasy:

"The hooks are in it!--the hooks are in it!--and burnin' hot!"

He squirmed and writhed with fiendish delight, and again he struck it on the nose and made it leap.

This was too much, and I beat a retreat--feigning boredom, or cessation of interest, of course; and absently carrying the still throbbing heart in my hand.

As I came upon the poop I saw Miss West, with her sewing basket, emerging from the port door of the chart-house. The deck-chairs were on that side, so I stole around on the starboard side of the chart-house in order to fling overboard unobserved the dreadful thing I carried. But, drying on the surface in the tropic heat and still pulsing inside, it stuck to my hand, so that it was a bad cast. Instead of clearing the railing, it struck on the pin-rail and stuck there in the shade, and as I opened the door to go below and wash my hands, with a last glance I saw it pulse where it had fallen.

When I came back it was still pulsing. I heard a splash overside from the waist of the ship, and knew the carcass had been flung overboard. I did not go around the chart-house and join Miss West, but stood enthralled by the spectacle of that heart that beat in the tropic heat.

Boisterous shouts from the sailors attracted my attention. They had all climbed to the top of the tall rail and were watching something outboard.

I followed their gaze and saw the amazing thing. That long-eviscerated shark was not dead. It moved, it swam, it thrashed about, and ever it strove to escape from the surface of the ocean. Sometimes it swam down as deep as fifty or a hundred feet, and then, still struggling to escape the surface, struggled involuntarily to the surface. Each failure thus to escape fetched wild laughter from the men. But why did they laugh? The thing was sublime, horrible, but it was not humorous. I leave it to you. What is there laughable in the sight of a pain-distraught fish rolling helplessly on the surface of the sea and exposing to the sun all its essential emptiness?

I was turning away, when renewed shouting drew my gaze. Half a dozen other sharks had appeared, smaller ones, nine or ten feet long. They attacked their helpless comrade. They tore him to pieces they destroyed him, devoured him. I saw the last shred of him disappear down their maws. He was gone, disintegrated, entombed in the living bodies of his kind, and already entering into the processes of digestion. And yet, there, in the shade on the pin-rail, that unbelievable and monstrous heart beat on.