

CHAPTER XIII

Of The Chondropterygii, And Other Uncouth Hordes Infesting The South Seas

At intervals in our lonely voyage, there were sights which diversified the scene; especially when the constellation Pisces was in the ascendant.

It's famous botanizing, they say, in Arkansas' boundless prairies; I commend the student of Ichthyology to an open boat, and the ocean moors of the Pacific. As your craft glides along, what strange monsters float by. Elsewhere, was never seen their like. And nowhere are they found in the books of the naturalists.

Though America be discovered, the Cathays of the deep are unknown. And whoso crosses the Pacific might have read lessons to Buffon. The sea-serpent is not a fable; and in the sea, that snake is but a garden worm. There are more wonders than the wonders rejected, and more sights unrevealed than you or I ever ever dreamt of. Moles and bats alone should be skeptics; and the only true infidelity is for a live man to vote himself dead. Be Sir Thomas Brown our ensample; who, while exploding "Vulgar Errors," heartily hugged all the mysteries in the Pentateuch.

But look! fathoms down in the sea; where ever saw you a phantom like that? An enormous crescent with antlers like a reindeer, and a Delta

of mouths. Slowly it sinks, and is seen no more.

Doctor Faust saw the devil; but you have seen the "Devil Fish."

Look again! Here comes another. Jarl calls it a Bone Shark. Full as large as a whale, it is spotted like a leopard; and tusk-like teeth overlap its jaws like those of the walrus. To seamen, nothing strikes more terror than the near vicinity of a creature like this. Great ships steer out of its path. And well they may; since the good craft Essex, and others, have been sunk by sea-monsters, as the alligator thrusts his horny snout through a Carribean canoe.

Ever present to us, was the apprehension of some sudden disaster from the extraordinary zoological specimens we almost hourly passed.

For the sharks, we saw them, not by units, nor by tens, nor by hundreds; but by thousands and by myriads. Trust me, there are more sharks in the sea than mortals on land.

And of these prolific fish there are full as many species as of dogs. But by the German naturalists Muller and Henle, who, in christening the sharks, have bestowed upon them the most heathenish names, they are classed under one family; which family, according to Muller, king-at-arms, is an undoubted branch of the ancient and famous tribe of the Chondropterygii.

To begin. There is the ordinary Brown Shark, or sea attorney, so called by sailors; a grasping, rapacious varlet, that in spite of the hard knocks received from it, often snapped viciously at our steering oar. At times, these gentry swim in herds; especially about the remains of a slaughtered whale. They are the vultures of the deep.

Then we often encountered the dandy Blue Shark, a long, taper and mighty genteel looking fellow, with a slender waist, like a Bond-street beau, and the whitest tiers of teeth imaginable. This dainty spark invariably lounged by with a careless fin and an indolent tail. But he looked infernally heartless.

How his cold-blooded, gentlemanly air, contrasted with the rude, savage swagger of the Tiger Shark; a round, portly gourmand; with distended mouth and collapsed conscience, swimming about seeking whom he might devour. These gluttons are the scavengers of navies, following ships in the South Seas, picking up odds and ends of garbage, and sometimes a tit-bit, a stray sailor. No wonder, then, that sailors denounce them. In substance, Jarl once assured me, that under any temporary misfortune, it was one of his sweetest consolations to remember, that in his day, he had murdered, not killed, shoals of Tiger Sharks.

Yet this is all wrong. As well hate a seraph, as a shark. Both were made by the same hand. And that sharks are lovable, witness their domestic endearments. No Fury so ferocious, as not to have some

amiable side. In the wild wilderness, a leopard-mother caresses her cub, as Hagar did Ishmael; or a queen of France the dauphin. We know not what we do when we hate. And I have the word of my gentlemanly friend Stanhope, for it; that he who declared he loved a good hater was but a respectable sort of Hottentot, at best. No very genteel epithet this, though coming from the genteelest of men. But when the digger of dictionaries said that saying of his, he was assuredly not much of a Christian. However, it is hard for one given up to constitutional hypos like him; to be filled with the milk and meekness of the gospels. Yet, with deference, I deny that my old uncle Johnson really believed in the sentiment ascribed to him. Love a hater, indeed! Who smacks his lips over gall? Now hate is a thankless thing. So, let us only hate hatred; and once give love play, we will fall in love with a unicorn. Ah! the easiest way is the best; and to hate, a man must work hard. Love is a delight; but hate a torment. And haters are thumbscrews, Scotch boots, and Spanish inquisitions to themselves. In five words--would they were a Siamese diphthong--he who hates is a fool.

For several days our Chamois was followed by two of these aforesaid Tiger Sharks. A brace of confidential inseparables, jogging along in our wake, side by side, like a couple of highwaymen, biding their time till you come to the cross-roads. But giving it up at last, for a bootless errand, they dropped farther and farther astern, until completely out of sight. Much to the Skyeman's chagrin; who long stood in the stern, lance poised for a dart.

But of all sharks, save me from the ghastly White Shark. For though we should hate naught, yet some dislikes are spontaneous; and disliking is not hating. And never yet could I bring myself to be loving, or even sociable, with a White Shark. He is not the sort of creature to enlist young affections.

This ghost of a fish is not often encountered, and shows plainer by night than by day. Timon-like, he always swims by himself; gliding along just under the surface, revealing a long, vague shape, of a milky hue; with glimpses now and then of his bottomless white pit of teeth. No need of a dentist hath he. Seen at night, stealing along like a spirit in the water, with horrific serenity of aspect, the White Shark sent many a thrill to us twain in the Chamois.

By day, and in the profoundest calms, oft were we startled by the ponderous sigh of the grampus, as lazily rising to the surface, he fetched a long breath after napping below.

And time and again we watched the darting albicore, the fish with the chain-plate armor and golden scales; the Nimrod of the seas, to whom so many flying fish fall a prey. Flying from their pursuers, many of them flew into our boat. But invariably they died from the shock. No nursing could restore them. One of their wings I removed, spreading it out to dry under a weight. In two days' time the thin membrane, all over tracings like those of a leaf, was transparent as isinglass,

and tinted with brilliant hues, like those of a changing silk.

Almost every day, we spied Black Fish; coal-black and glossy. They seemed to swim by revolving round and round in the water, like a wheel; their dorsal fins, every now and then shooting into view, like spokes.

Of a somewhat similar species, but smaller, and clipper-built about the nose, were the Algerines; so called, probably, from their corsair propensities; waylaying peaceful fish on the high seas, and plundering them of body and soul at a gulp. Atrocious Turks! a crusade should be preached against them.

Besides all these, we encountered Killers and Thrashers, by far the most spirited and "spunky" of the finny tribes. Though little larger than a porpoise, a band of them think nothing of assailing leviathan himself. They bait the monster, as dogs a bull. The Killers seizing the Right whale by his immense, sulky lower lip, and the Thrashers fastening on to his back, and beating him with their sinewy tails. Often they come off conquerors, worrying the enemy to death. Though, sooth to say, if leviathan gets but one sweep at them with his terrible tail, they go flying into the air, as if tossed from Taurus' horn.

This sight we beheld. Had old Wouvermans, who once painted a bull bait, been along with us, a rare chance, that, for his pencil. And Gudin or Isabey might have thrown the blue rolling sea into the picture. Lastly, one of Claude's setting summer suns would have

glorified the whole. Oh, believe me, God's creatures fighting, fin
for fin, a thousand miles from land, and with the round horizon for
an arena; is no ignoble subject for a masterpiece.

Such are a few of the sights of the great South Sea. But there is no
telling all. The Pacific is populous as China.