

CHAPTER XVIII

My Lord Shark And His Pages

There is a fish in the sea that evermore, like a surly lord, only goes abroad attended by his suite. It is the Shovel-nosed Shark. A clumsy lethargic monster, unshapely as his name, and the last species of his kind, one would think, to be so bravely waited upon, as he is. His suite is composed of those dainty little creatures called Pilot fish by sailors. But by night his retinue is frequently increased by the presence of several small luminous fish, running in advance, and flourishing their flambeaux like link-boys lighting the monster's way. Pity there were no ray-fish in rear, page-like, to carry his caudal train.

Now the relation subsisting between the Pilot fish above mentioned and their huge ungainly lord, seems one of the most inscrutable things in nature. At any rate, it poses poor me to comprehend. That a monster so ferocious, should suffer five or six little sparks, hardly fourteen inches long, to gambol about his grim hull with the utmost impunity, is of itself something strange. But when it is considered, that by a reciprocal understanding, the Pilot fish seem to act as scouts to the shark, warning him of danger, and apprising him of the vicinity of prey; and moreover, in case of his being killed, evincing their anguish by certain agitations, otherwise inexplicable; the whole thing becomes a mystery unfathomable. Truly marvels abound. It

needs no dead man to be raised, to convince us of some things. Even my Viking marveled full as much at those Pilot fish as he would have marveled at the Pentecost.

But perhaps a little incident, occurring about this period, will best illustrate the matter in hand.

We were gliding along, hardly three knots an hour, when my comrade, who had been dozing over the gunwale, suddenly started to his feet, and pointed out an immense Shovel-nosed Shark, less than a boat's length distant, and about half a fathom beneath the surface. A lance was at once snatched from its place; and true to his calling, Jarl was about to dart it at the fish, when, interested by the sight of its radiant little scouts, I begged him to desist.

One of them was right under the shark, nibbling at his ventral fin; another above, hovering about his dorsal appurtenance; one on each flank; and a frisking fifth pranking about his nose, seemingly having something to say of a confidential nature. They were of a bright, steel-blue color, alternated with jet black stripes; with glistening bellies of a silver-white. Clinging to the back of the shark, were four or five Remoras, or sucking-fish; snaky parasites, impossible to remove from whatever they adhere to, without destroying their lives. The Remora has little power in swimming; hence its sole locomotion is on the backs of larger fish. Leech-like, it sticketh closer than a false brother in prosperity; closer than a beggar to the benevolent;

closer than Webster to the Constitution. But it feeds upon what it clings to; its feelers having a direct communication with the esophagus.

The shark swam sluggishly; creating no sign of a ripple, but ever and anon shaking his Medusa locks, writhing and curling with horrible life. Now and then, the nimble Pilot fish darted from his side--this way and that--mostly toward our boat; but previous to taking a fresh start ever returning to their liege lord to report progress.

A thought struck me. Baiting a rope's end with a morsel of our almost useless salt beef, I suffered it to trail in the sea. Instantly the foremost scout swam toward it; hesitated; paused; but at last advancing, briskly snuffed at the line, and taking one finical little nibble, retreated toward the shark. Another moment, and the great Tamerlane himself turned heavily about; pointing his black, cannon-like nose directly toward our broadside. Meanwhile, the little Pilot fish darted hither and thither; keeping up a mighty fidgeting, like men of small minds in a state of nervous agitation.

Presently, Tamerlane swam nearer and nearer, all the while lazily eyeing the Chamois, as a wild boar a kid. Suddenly making a rush for it, in the foam he made away with the bait. But the next instant, the uplifted lance sped at his skull; and thrashing his requiem with his sinewy tail, he sunk slowly, through his own blood, out of sight.

Down with him swam the terrified Pilot fish; but soon after, three of them were observed close to the boat, gliding along at a uniform pace; one on each side, and one in advance; even as they had attended their lord. Doubtless, one was under our keel.

"A good omen," said Jarl; "no harm will befall us so long as they stay."

But however that might be, follow us they did, for many days after: until an event occurred, which necessitated their withdrawal.