

CHAPTER XXXII

Xiphius Platypterus

About this time, the loneliness of our voyage was relieved by an event worth relating.

Ever since leaving the Pearl Shell Islands, the Parki had been followed by shoals of small fish, pleasantly enlivening the sea, and socially swimming by her side. But in vain did Jarl and I search among their ranks for the little, steel-blue Pilot fish, so long outriders of the Chamois. But perhaps since the Chamois was now high and dry on the Parki's deck, our bright little avant-couriers were lurking out of sight, far down in the brine; racing along close to the keel.

But it is not with the Pilot fish that we now have to do.

One morning our attention was attracted to a mighty commotion in the water. The shoals of fish were darting hither and thither, and leaping into the air in the utmost affright. Samoa declared, that their deadly foe the Sword fish must be after them.

And here let me say, that, since of all the bullies, and braggarts, and bravoos, and free-booters, and Hectors, and fish-at-arms, and knight-errants, and moss-troopers, and assassins, and foot-pads, and

gallant soldiers, and immortal heroes that swim the seas, the Indian Sword fish is by far the most remarkable, I propose to dedicate this chapter to a special description of the warrior. In doing which, I but follow the example of all chroniclers and historians, my Peloponnesian friend Thucydides and others, who are ever mindful of devoting much space to accounts of eminent destroyers; for the purpose, no doubt, of holding them up as ensamples to the world.

Now, the fish here treated of is a very different creature from the Sword fish frequenting the Northern Atlantic; being much larger every way, and a more dashing varlet to boot. Furthermore, he is denominated the Indian Sword fish, in contradistinction from his namesake above mentioned. But by seamen in the Pacific, he is more commonly known as the Bill fish; while for those who love science and hard names, be it known, that among the erudite naturalists he goeth by the outlandish appellation of "Xiphius Platypterus."

But I waive for my hero all these his cognomens, and substitute a much better one of my own: namely, the Chevalier. And a Chevalier he is, by good right and title. A true gentleman of Black Prince Edward's bright day, when all gentlemen were known by their swords; whereas, in times present, the Sword fish excepted, they are mostly known by their high polished boots and rattans.

A right valiant and jaunty Chevalier is our hero; going about with his long Toledo perpetually drawn. Rely upon it, he will fight you to

the hilt, for his bony blade has never a scabbard. He himself sprang from it at birth; yea, at the very moment he leaped into the Battle of Life; as we mortals ourselves spring all naked and scabbardless into the world. Yet, rather, are we scabbards to our souls. And the drawn soul of genius is more glittering than the drawn cimeter of Saladin. But how many let their steel sleep, till it eat up the scabbard itself, and both corrode to rust-chips. Saw you ever the hillocks of old Spanish anchors, and anchor-stocks of ancient galleons, at the bottom of Callao Bay? The world is full of old Tower armories, and dilapidated Venetian arsenals, and rusty old rapiers. But true warriors polish their good blades by the bright beams of the morning; and gird them on to their brave sirloins; and watch for rust spots as for foes; and by many stout thrusts and stoccadoes keep their metal lustrous and keen, as the spears of the Northern Lights charging over Greenland.

Fire from the flint is our Chevalier enraged. He takes umbrage at the cut of some ship's keel crossing his road; and straightway runs a tilt at it; with one mad lounge thrusting his Andrea Ferrara clean through and through; not seldom breaking it short off at the haft, like a bravo leaving his poignard in the vitals of his foe.

In the case of the English ship Foxhound, the blade penetrated through the most solid part of her hull, the bow; going completely through the copper plates and timbers, and showing for several inches in the hold. On the return of the ship to London, it was carefully

sawn out; and, imbedded in the original wood, like a fossil, is still preserved. But this was a comparatively harmless onslaught of the valiant Chevalier. With the Rousseau, of Nantucket, it fared worse. She was almost mortally stabbed; her assailant withdrawing his blade. And it was only by keeping the pumps clanging, that she managed to swim into a Tahitian harbor, "heave down," and have her wound dressed by a ship-surgeon with tar and oakum. This ship I met with at sea, shortly after the disaster.

At what armory our Chevalier equips himself after one of his spiteful tilting-matches, it would not be easy to say. But very hard for him, if ever after he goes about in the lists, swordless and disarmed, at the mercy of any caitiff shark he may meet.

Now, seeing that our fellow-voyagers, the little fish along-side, were sorely tormented and thinned out by the incursions of a pertinacious Chevalier, bent upon making a hearty breakfast out of them, I determined to interfere in their behalf, and capture the enemy.

With shark-hook and line I succeeded, and brought my brave gentleman to the deck. He made an emphatic landing; lashing the planks with his sinewy tail; while a yard and a half in advance of his eyes, reached forth his terrible blade.

As victor, I was entitled to the arms of the vanquished; so, quickly

dispatching him, and sawing off his Toledo, I bore it away for a trophy. It was three-sided, slightly concave on each, like a bayonet; and some three inches through at the base, it tapered from thence to a point.

And though tempered not in Tagus or Guadalquiver, it yet revealed upon its surface that wavy grain and watery fleckiness peculiar to tried blades of Spain. It was an aromatic sword; like the ancient caliph's, giving out a peculiar musky odor by friction. But far different from steel of Tagus or Damascus, it was inflexible as Crocket's rifle tube; no doubt, as deadly.

Long hung that rapier over the head of my hammock. Was it not storied as the good trenchant blade of brave Bayard, that other chevalier? The knight's may have slain its scores, or fifties; but the weapon I preserved had, doubtless, run through and riddled its thousands.