

Search of the Castaways

By

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In Search of the Castaways

or

The Children of Captain Grant

South America

CHAPTER I THE SHARK

ON the 26th of July, 1864, a magnificent yacht was steaming along the North Channel at full speed, with a strong breeze blowing from the N. E. The Union Jack was flying at the mizzen-mast, and a blue standard bearing the initials E. G., embroidered in gold, and surmounted by a ducal coronet, floated from the topgallant head of the main-mast. The name of the yacht was the DUNCAN, and the owner was Lord Glenarvan, one of the sixteen Scotch peers who sit in the Upper House, and the most distinguished member of the Royal Thames Yacht Club, so famous throughout the United Kingdom.

Lord Edward Glenarvan was on board with his young wife, Lady Helena, and one of his cousins, Major McNabbs.

The DUNCAN was newly built, and had been making a trial trip a few miles outside the Firth of Clyde. She was returning to Glasgow, and the Isle of Arran already loomed in the distance, when the sailor on watch caught sight of an enormous fish sporting in the wake of the ship. Lord Edward, who was immediately apprised of the fact, came up on the poop a few minutes after with his cousin, and asked John Mangles, the captain, what sort of an animal he thought it was.

"Well, since your Lordship asks my opinion," said Mangles, "I think it is a shark, and a fine large one too."

"A shark on these shores!"

"There is nothing at all improbable in that," returned the captain.

"This fish belongs to a species that is found in all latitudes and in all seas. It is the 'balance-fish,' or hammer-headed shark, if I am not much mistaken. But if your Lordship has no objections, and it would give the smallest pleasure to Lady Helena to see a novelty in the way of fishing, we'll soon haul up the monster and find out what it really is."

"What do you say, McNabbs? Shall we try to catch it?"
asked Lord Glenarvan.

"If you like; it's all one to me," was his cousin's cool reply.

"The more of those terrible creatures that are killed the better, at all events," said John Mangles, "so let's seize the chance, and it will not only give us a little diversion, but be doing a good action."

"Very well, set to work, then," said Glenarvan.

Lady Helena soon joined her husband on deck, quite charmed at the prospect

of such exciting sport. The sea was splendid, and every movement of the shark was distinctly visible. In obedience to the captain's orders, the sailors threw a strong rope over the starboard side of the yacht, with a big hook at the end of it, concealed in a thick lump of bacon. The bait took at once, though the shark was full fifty yards distant. He began to make rapidly for the yacht, beating the waves violently with his fins, and keeping his tail in a perfectly straight line.

As he got nearer, his great projecting eyes could be seen inflamed with greed, and his gaping jaws with their quadruple row of teeth. His head was large, and shaped like a double hammer at the end of a handle. John Mangles was right. This was evidently a balance-fish-- the most voracious of all the SQUALIDAE species.

The passengers and sailors on the yacht were watching all the animal's movements with the liveliest interest.

He soon came within reach of the bait, turned over on his back to make a good dart at it, and in a second bacon and contents

had disappeared. He had hooked himself now, as the tremendous jerk he gave the cable proved, and the sailors began to haul in the monster by means of tackle attached to the mainyard. He struggled desperately, but his captors were prepared for his violence, and had a long rope ready with a slip knot, which caught his tail and rendered him powerless at once. In a few minutes more he was hoisted up over the side of the yacht and thrown on the deck. A man came forward immediately, hatchet in hand, and approaching him cautiously, with one powerful stroke cut off his tail.

This ended the business, for there was no longer any fear of the shark. But, though the sailors' vengeance was satisfied, their curiosity was not; they knew the brute had no very delicate appetite, and the contents of his stomach might be worth investigation. This is the common practice on all ships when a shark is captured, but Lady Glenarvan declined to be present at such a disgusting exploration, and withdrew to the cabin again. The fish was still breathing; it measured ten feet in length, and weighed more than six hundred pounds. This was nothing extraordinary, for though the hammer-headed shark is not classed among the most gigantic of the species, it is always reckoned among the most formidable.

The huge brute was soon ripped up in a very unceremonious fashion. The hook had fixed right in the stomach, which was found to be absolutely empty, and the disappointed sailors were just going to throw

the remains overboard, when the boatswain's attention was attracted by some large object sticking fast in one of the viscera.

"I say! what's this?" he exclaimed.

"That!" replied one of the sailors, "why, it's a piece of rock the beast swallowed by way of ballast."

"It's just a bottle, neither more nor less, that the fellow has got in his inside, and couldn't digest," said another of the crew.

"Hold your tongues, all of you!" said Tom Austin, the mate of the DUNCAN. "Don't you see the animal has been such an inveterate tippler that he has not only drunk the wine, but swallowed the bottle?"

"What!" said Lord Glenarvan. "Do you mean to say it is a bottle that the shark has got in his stomach."

"Ay, it is a bottle, most certainly," replied the boatswain, "but not just from the cellar."

"Well, Tom, be careful how you take it out," said Lord Glenarvan, "for bottles found in the sea often contain precious documents."

"Do you think this does?" said Major McNabbs, incredulously.

"It possibly may, at any rate."

"Oh! I'm not saying it doesn't. There may perhaps be some secret in it," returned the Major.

"That's just what we're to see," said his cousin. "Well, Tom."

"Here it is," said the mate, holding up a shapeless lump he had managed to pull out, though with some difficulty.

"Get the filthy thing washed then, and bring it to the cabin."

Tom obeyed, and in a few minutes brought in the bottle and laid it on the table, at which Lord Glenarvan and the Major were sitting ready with the captain, and, of course Lady Helena, for women, they say, are always a little curious. Everything is an event at sea. For a moment they all sat silent, gazing at this frail relic, wondering if it told the tale of sad disaster, or brought some trifling message from a frolic-loving sailor, who had flung it into the sea to amuse himself when he had nothing better to do.

However, the only way to know was to examine the bottle, and Glenarvan set to work without further delay, so carefully and minutely, that he might have been taken for a coroner making an inquest.

He commenced by a close inspection of the outside.

The neck was long and slender, and round the thick rim there was still an end of wire hanging, though eaten away with rust.

The sides were very thick, and strong enough to bear great pressure.

It was evidently of Champagne origin, and the Major said immediately, "That's one of our Clicquot's bottles."

Nobody contradicted him, as he was supposed to know;

but Lady Helena exclaimed, "What does it matter about the bottle, if we don't know where it comes from?"

"We shall know that, too, presently, and we may affirm this much already-- it comes from a long way off. Look at those petrifications all over it, these different substances almost turned to mineral, we might say, through the action of the salt water! This waif had been tossing about in the ocean a long time before the shark swallowed it."

"I quite agree with you," said McNabbs. "I dare say this frail concern has made a long voyage, protected by this strong covering."

"But I want to know where from?" said Lady Glenarvan.

"Wait a little, dear Helena, wait; we must have patience with bottles; but if I am not much mistaken, this one will answer all our questions," replied her husband, beginning to scrape away the hard substances

round the neck. Soon the cork made its appearance, but much damaged by the water.

"That's vexing," said Lord Edward, "for if papers are inside, they'll be in a pretty state!"

"It's to be feared they will," said the Major.

"But it is a lucky thing the shark swallowed them, I must say," added Glenarvan, "for the bottle would have sunk to the bottom before long with such a cork as this."

"That's true enough," replied John Mangles, "and yet it would have been better to have fished them up in the open sea. Then we might have found out the road they had come by taking the exact latitude and longitude, and studying the atmospheric and submarine currents; but with such a postman as a shark, that goes against wind and tide, there's no clew whatever to the starting-point."

"We shall see," said Glenarvan, gently taking out the cork. A strong odor of salt water pervaded the whole saloon, and Lady Helena asked impatiently: "Well, what is there?"

"I was right!" exclaimed Glenarvan. "I see papers inside. But I fear it will be impossible to remove them," he added,

"for they appear to have rotted with the damp, and are sticking to the sides of the bottle."

"Break it," said the Major.

"I would rather preserve the whole if I could."

"No doubt you would," said Lady Helena; "but the contents are more valuable than the bottle, and we had better sacrifice the one than the other."

"If your Lordship would simply break off the neck, I think we might easily withdraw the papers," suggested John Mangles.

"Try it, Edward, try it," said Lady Helena.

Lord Glenarvan was very unwilling, but he found there was no alternative; the precious bottle must be broken.

They had to get a hammer before this could be done, though, for the stony material had acquired the hardness of granite.

A few sharp strokes, however, soon shivered it to fragments, many of which had pieces of paper sticking to them.

These were carefully removed by Lord Glenarvan, and separated and spread out on the table before the eager gaze of his wife and friends.