

A True Shark Story

by Frank Bullen

“How very hard it is to provide for a young, fast-growing family nowadays,” said the mother shark, turning, for the hundredth time that morning, upon her broad side in order to get a better view of what might be stirring above. For nearly a week she had been fasting—in fact ever since she came in hurriedly at the close of a great feast upon the stripped carcase of a recent whale. There, by dint of the energy of her massive shoulders, her fourteen feet of length, and fivefold rows of triangular teeth, she had managed to secure a respectable proportion of the spoil for the replenishing of her own huge maw as well as for the upkeep of the fourteen sharklings that were now restlessly darting in and out of their cosy cave at the far end of her capacious throat.

Within the immediate range of her glance a vast black shadow obscured a wide, irregularly shaped area of the blazing sunshine. It was so calm that the shadow seemed stationary. In the direction of this cool penumbra her gaze lingered earnestly. For hereditary instinct as well as long experience gave her the knowledge that from the substance of such shadows came food dropping down, varied and toothsome, actually alive upon rare occasions. Somewhat impatiently she wondered at the long time that her little blue and gold attendant had been gone. He was so seldom absent from his place between her eyes for a whole minute that she got quite uneasy. But while she fidgeted fretfully, with many twitchings of her flexible “gaff topsail,” back came the pilot-fish in a tearing hurry. “Now then, partner, move along, do. There’s a lump of fat pork almost as big as your head hanging over that ship’s stern. I don’t quite understand why it doesn’t sink, but it is good. I nibbled just a crumb, and you can be sure this time that it’s no bagful of cinders like that nasty mouthful that gave you the chest-ache so bad this morning.” The latter part of this energetic exordium was lost upon Mother Shark, being drowned in the wash set up by her great tail-fin, which was going in grand style, starting her off at such a rate that two or three stragglers of the family had to skip like shrimps to get indoors before they were left behind and lost.

Straight as an arrow to the mark went the tiny guide, keeping just in front of his huge friend’s snout. Together they swept into the shadow, where, sure enough, a mass of meat hung just below the sea surface, though gently lifted almost out of water every now and then. “Oh, do look, Mamma! there’s a big fish. Is he going to eat up that pretty little one, do you think?”—“Oh, no, my little man,” struck in the mate, “but you watch him now.” As he spoke the great grey body took a curve laterally, a dazzling glare of white appeared, and there, beneath the speaker, was a crescentic gap in the smooth, livid underside, fringed with innumerable points like *chevaux-de-frise*, and as big as the gape of a coal-sack. Around it the small pilot circled excitedly at top speed. Slowly it rose beneath the bait, which the mate as gently slacked away, there was a gulp, and the big joint disappeared. There was a flash, a splash, and an eddy. Then the rope attached to the shark-hook concealed in that pork groaned over the rail as it felt the strain.

“Lay aft the watch,” roared the mate, and amid the trampling of many feet, a babel of directions, and a tremendous tumult alongside, through the writhings of the captive monster, she was transferred forward to the lee gangway, where, by the aid of a stout watch-tackle, she was hoisted out of water.

“Don’t take him aboard,” cried the captain; “make such an infernal mess if you do. Just spritsle yard him ’n let him go agen.” So a piece of scantling was got from the carpenter, pointed at both ends, about four feet long. This they drove through her jaws from side to side. Another wedge-shaped piece

was planted diagonally down through her broad snout, the upper end pointing forward. Then they cut off the wide pectoral fins, letting the quivering carcass fall into the sea again by the simple expedient of chopping the hook out. "What abominable cruelty," muttered a gentle-faced man among the crowding passengers, as he turned away sick at heart. But the bustling seamen looked pityingly at him, wondering doubtless at his lack of sporting instincts. Thus disabled, the miserable monster plunged blindly in uncertain directions, unable to steer herself, unheeding the frantic caresses of her faithful little satellite, who had almost exhausted himself by leaping up at her as she hung struggling against the vessel's side. Neither did she notice the puzzled, wavering movements of her wondering brood. So she disappeared from the view of the laughing, happy crowd on deck. But whichever way she rushed she always fetched up to the surface promptly, because of the vane in her head. Thus for a day and a night she fought aimlessly with all the forces of amazing vitality pent up in her huge body against these torturing disablements, until mercifully she fell in with a couple of ravenous congeners. Scenting fresh blood they made for her straightway. Like mad things they fell upon her. Long and hard they strove, tearing their way through the tough framework until assistance came from all quarters, and a motley multitude of various hungry ones cleaned up every shred of the welcome banquet, leaving only the deserted pilot to seek another partner.

Source:

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