

BECKE LOUIS

A MEMORY OF
THE SOUTHERN
SEAS

Louis Becke

A Memory Of The Southern Seas

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A Memory Of The Southern Seas / 1904

CAPTAIN “BULLY” HAYES

In other works by the present writer frequent allusion has been made, either by the author or by other persons, to Captain Hayes. Perhaps the continuous appearance of his name may have been irritating to many of my readers; if so I can only plead that it is almost impossible when writing of wild life in the Southern Seas to avoid mentioning him. Every one who sailed the Austral seas between the “fifties” and “seventies,” and thousands who had not, knew of him and had heard tales of him. In some cases these tales were to his credit; mostly they were not. However, the writer makes no further apology for reproducing the following sketch of the great “Bully” which he contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and which, by the courtesy of the editor of that journal, he is able to include in this volume.

In a most interesting, though all too brief, sketch of the life of the late Rev. James Chalmers, the famous New Guinea missionary, which appeared in the January number of a popular religious magazine, the author, the Rev. Richard Lovett, gives us a brief glance of the notorious Captain “Bully” Hayes. Mr. Chalmers, in 1866, sailed for the South Seas with his wife in the missionary ship *John Williams*—the second vessel of that name, the present beautiful steamer being the fourth *John Williams*.

The second John Williams had but a brief existence, for on her first voyage she was wrecked on Nine Island (the “Savage” Island of Captain Cook). Hayes happened to be there with his vessel, and agreed to convey the shipwrecked missionaries to Samoa. No doubt he charged them a pretty stiff price, for he always said that missionaries “were teaching Kanakas the degrading doctrine that even if a man killed his enemy and cut out and ate his heart in public, and otherwise misconducted himself, he could yet secure a front seat in the Kingdom of Heaven if he said he was sorry and was then baptized as Aperamo (Abraham) or Lakopo (Jacob).”

“It is characteristic of Chalmers,” writes Mr. Lovett, “that he was able to exert considerable influence over this ruffian, and even saw good points in him, not easily evident to others.”

The present writer sailed with Hayes on four voyages as supercargo, and was with the big-bearded, heavy-handed, and alleged “terror of the South Seas” when his famous brig *Leonora* was wrecked on Strong’s Island, one wild night in March, 1875. And he has nothing but kindly memories of a much-maligned man, who, with all his faults, was never the cold-blooded murderer whose fictitious atrocities once formed the theme of a highly blood-curdling melodrama staged in the old Victoria Theatre, in Pitt Street, Sydney, under the title of “The Pirate of the Pacific.” In this lively production of dramatic genius Hayes was portrayed as something worse than Blackboard or Llonois, and committed more murders and abductions of beautiful women in two hours than ever fell to the luck in real life of the most gorgeous pirate on record. No one of the audience was more interested or applauded more vigorously the villain’s downfall than “Bully” Hayes himself, who was seated in a private box with a lady. He had come to Sydney by steamer from Melbourne, where he had left his ship in the hands of brokers for sale, and almost the first thing he saw on arrival were the theatrical posters concerning himself and his career of crime.

“I would have gone for the theatre people,” he told the writer, “if they had had any money, but the man who ‘played’ me was the lessee of the theatre and was hard up. I think his name was Hoskins. He was a big fat fellow, with a soapy, slithery kind of a voice, and I lent him ten pounds, which he spent on a dinner to myself and some of his company. I guess we had a real good time.”

But let us hear what poor ill-fated Missionary Chalmers has to say about the alleged pirate:—

“Hayes seemed to take to me during the frequent meetings we had on shore” (this was when the shipwrecked missionaries and their wives were living on Savage Island), “and before going on board for good I met him one afternoon and said to him, ‘Captain Hayes, I hope you will have no objection to our having morning and evening service on board, and twice on Sabbaths. All short, and only those who like need attend.’ Certainly not. My ship is a missionary ship now’ (humorous dog), ‘and I hope you will feel it so. All on board will attend these services.’ I replied, ‘Only if they are inclined.’” (If they had shirked it, the redoubtable “Bully” would have made attendance compulsory with a belaying pin.)

“Hayes was a perfect host and a thorough gentleman. His wife and children were on board. We had fearful weather all the time, yet I must say we enjoyed ourselves.... We had gone so far south that we could easily fetch Tahiti, and so we stood for it, causing us to be much longer on board. Hayes several times lost his temper and did very queer things, acting now and then more like a madman than a sane man. Much of his past life he related to us at table, especially of things (he did) to cheat Governments.”

Poor “Bully!” He certainly did like to “cheat Governments,” although he despised cheating private individuals—unless it was for a large amount. And he frequently “lost his temper” also; and when that occurred things were very uncomfortable for the man or men who caused it. On one occasion, during an electrical storm off New Guinea, a number of corposants appeared on the yards of his vessel, which was manned by Polynesians and some Portuguese. One of the latter was so terrified at the ghastly *corpo santo* that he fell on his knees and held a small leaden crucifix, which he wore on his neck, to his lips. His example was quickly followed by the rest of his countrymen; which so enraged Hayes that, seizing the first offender, he tore the crucifix from his hand, and, rolling it into a lump, thrust it into his month *and made him swallow it*.

“You’ll kill the man, sir,” cried Hussey, his American mate, who, being a good Catholic, was horrified.

Hayes laughed savagely: “If that bit of lead is good externally it ought to be a darned sight better when taken internally.”

He was a humorous man at times, even when he was cross. And he was one of the best sailormen that ever trod a deck. A chronometer watch, which was committed to the care of the writer by Hayes, bore this inscription:—

“From Isaac Steuart, of New York, to Captain William Henry Hayes, of Cleveland, Ohio. A gift of esteem and respect for his bravery in saving the lives of seventeen persons at the risk of his own. Honor to the brave.”

Hayes told me that story—modestly and simply as brave men only tell a tale of their own dauntless daring. And he told me other stories as well of his strange, wild career; of Gordon of Khartoum, whom he had known, and of Ward and Burgevine and the Taeping leaders; and how Burgevine and he quarrelled over a love affair and stood face to face, pistols in hand, when Ward sprang in between them and said that the woman was his, and that they were fools to fight over what belonged to neither of them and what he would gladly be rid of himself.

Peace to his *manes!* He died—in his sea-boots—from a blow on his big, bald head, superinduced by his attention to a lady who was “no better than she ought to have been,” even for the islands of the North Pacific.

THE “WHALE CURE”

I once heard a man who for nearly six years had been a martyr to rheumatism say he would give a thousand pounds to have a cure effected.

“I wish, then, that we were in Australia or New Zealand during the shore whaling season,” remarked a friend of the writer; “I should feel pretty certain of annexing that thousand pounds.” And then he described the whale cure.

The “cure” is not fiction. It is a fact, so the whalemens assert, and there are many people at the township of Eden, Twofold Bay, New South Wales, who, it is vouched, can tell of several cases of chronic rheumatism that have been absolutely perfectly cured by the treatment herewith briefly described. How it came to be discovered I do not know, but it has been known to American whalemens for years.

When a whale is killed and towed ashore (it does not matter whether it is a “right,” humpback, finback, or sperm whale) and while the interior of the carcass still retains a little warmth, a hole is cut through one side of the body sufficiently large to admit the patient, the lower part of whose body from the feet to the waist should sink in the whale’s intestines, leaving the head, of course, outside the aperture. The latter is closed up as closely as possible, otherwise the patient would not be able to breathe through the volume of ammoniacal gases which would escape from every opening left uncovered. It is these gases, which are of an overpowering and atrocious odour, that bring about the cure, so the whalemens say. Sometimes the patient cannot stand this horrible bath for more than an hour, and has to be lifted out in a fainting condition, to undergo a second, third, or perhaps fourth course on that or the following day. Twenty or thirty hours, it is said, will effect a radical cure in the most severe cases, provided there is no malformation or distortion of the joints, and even in such cases the treatment causes very great relief. One man who was put in up to his neck in the carcass of a small “humpback” stood it for sixteen hours, being taken out at two-hour intervals. He went off declaring himself to be cured. A year later he had a return of the complaint and underwent the treatment a second time.

All the “shore” whalemens whom the writer has met thoroughly believe in the efficacy of the remedy, and by way of practical proof assert that no man who works at cutting-in and trying out a whale ever suffers from rheumatism. Furthermore, however, some of them maintain that the “deader” the whale is, the better the remedy. “More gas in him,” they say. And any one who has been within a mile of a week-dead whale will believe *that*.

Anyway, if there is any person, rheumatic or otherwise, who wants to emulate Jonah’s adventure in a safe manner (with a dead whale), let him write to the Davidson Brothers, Ben Boyd Point, Twofold Bay, N.S.W., or to the Messrs. Christian, Norfolk Island, and I am sure those valorous whalemens would help him to achieve his desire.

THE SEA “SALMON” SEASON IN AUSTRALIA

The sea salmon make their appearance on the southern half of the eastern seaboard of Australia with undeviating regularity in the last week of October, and, entering the rivers and inlets, remain on the coast till the first week of December. As far as my knowledge goes, they come from the south and travel northwards, and do not appear to relish the tropical waters of the North Queensland coast, though I have heard that some years ago a vast “school” entered the waters of Port Denison.

Given a dear, sunny day and a smooth sea the advent of these fish to the bar harbours and rivers of New South Wales presents a truly extraordinary sight. From any moderately high bluff or headland one can discern their approach nearly two miles away. You see a dark patch upon the water, and were it not for the attendant flocks of gulls and other aquatic birds, one would imagine it to be but the passing reflection of a cloud. But presently you see another and another; and, still farther out, a long black line flecked with white can be discerned with a good glass. Then you look above—the sky is cloudless blue, and you know that the dark moving patches are the advance battalions of countless thousands of sea salmon, and that the mile-long black and white streak behind them is the main body of the first mighty army; for others are to follow day by day for another fortnight.

Probably the look-out man at the pilot station is the first to see them, and in a few minutes the lazy little seaport town awakes from its morning lethargy, and even the butcher, and baker, and bootmaker, and bank manager, and other commercial magnates shut up shop and walk to the pilot station to watch the salmon “take” the bar, whilst the entire public school rushes home to prepare its rude tackle for the onslaught that will begin at dark.

The bar is a mile wide or more, and though there is but little surf, the ebbing tide, running at five knots, makes a great commotion, and the shallow water is thick with yellow sand swept seaward to the pale green beyond. Presently the first “school” of salmon reaches the protecting reef on the southern side—and then it stops. The fish well know that such a current as that cannot be stemmed, and wait, moving slowly to and fro, the dark blue compactness of their serried masses ever and anon broken by flashes of silver as some turn on their sides or make an occasional leap clear out of the water to avoid the pressure of their fellows.

An hour or so passes; then the tumult on the bar ceases, the incoming seas rise clear and sandless, and the fierce race of the current slows down to a gentle drift; it is slack water, and the fish begin to move. One after another the foremost masses sweep round the horn of the reef and head for the smooth water inside. On the starboard hand a line of yellow sandbank is drying in the sun, and the passage has now narrowed down to a width of fifty yards; in twenty minutes every inch of water, from the rocky headland on the south side of the entrance to where the river makes a sharp turn northward, half a mile away, is packed with a living, moving mass. Behind follows the main body, the two horns of the crescent shape which it had at first preserved now swimming swiftly ahead, and converging towards each other as the entrance to the bar is reached, and the centre falling back with the precision of well-trained troops. And then in a square, solid mass, thirty or forty feet in width, they begin the passage, and for two hours or more the long dark lines of fish pass steadily onward, only thrown into momentary confusion now and then by a heavy swell, which, however, does no more than gently undulate the rearmost lines of fish, and then subsides, overcome by the weight and solidity of the living wall.

Along the beach on the southern side of the river stand a hundred or more yelling urchins, with stout lines fitted with many baitless hooks and weighted with a stone. As the swarming fish press steadily on within ten feet or less of the shore the children fling their lines across, and draw them quickly in. Sometimes two or three fish are “jagged” at once, and as the average weight is 10 lb. the jagger takes a turn of the line around his waist and straggles up the beach. Even if he has but one fish hooked amidships he has all he can do to drag him out from the countless thousands and land him. It

is not an eminently ideal or sportsmanlike sort of fishing, this “jagging,” but it possesses a marvellous enjoyment and fascination for the youth of ten, and older people as well; for a full-grown salmon is a powerful fellow, and his big, fluke-like tail enables him to make a terrific rush when under the influence of terror or when chasing his prey.

Once over the bar and into the placid waters of the tidal river, the vanguards of the hundreds of thousands to follow pursue their way steadily up the shallow flats and numberless blind creeks, where they remain till spawning is over. Every day some fresh accessions to their numbers, and at night time strange, indescribable sounds are heard, caused by the movements of the fishes’ tails and fins as they swim to and fro, and one section, meeting another, endeavours to force a right-of-way. On the third or fourth evening the sharks and porpoises appear, having followed the “schools” in from the sea, and wreak fearful havoc among them. Sometimes in a deep pool or quiet reach of the river one may see a school of perhaps five or six thousand terrified salmon, wedged one up against the other, unable to move from their very numbers, while half a dozen sharks dash in among them and devour them by the score; and often as the current runs seaward hundreds of half bodies of salmon can be seen going out over the bar. At night time the townspeople appear on the scene in boats with lanterns and spears, and for no other purpose than the mere love of useless slaughter kill the fish till their arms are exhausted. At places within easy access of Sydney by steamer or rail some few thousands of salmon are sent to market, but as the flesh is somewhat coarse, they are only bought by the poorer members of the community, 4d. and 6d. each being considered a good retail price for a 10 lb. fish. The roes, however, are excellent eating, and some attempt has been made to smoke them on a large scale, but like everything else connected with the fishing industry (or rather want of industry) in New South Wales, has failed. It sometimes happens (as I once witnessed in Trial Bay, on the coast of New South Wales) that heavy weather will set in when the salmon are either passing inwards over the bars or are returning to sea. The destruction that is then wrought among them is terrific. On the occasion of which I speak, every heavy roller that reared and then dashed upon the beach flung upon the sands hundreds of the fish, stunned and bleeding. At one spot where the beach had but a very slight inclination towards the water from the line of scrub above high-water mark there were literally many thousands of salmon, lying three and four deep, and in places piled up in irregular ridges and firmly packed together with sand and seaweed.

“JACK SHARK”

“What is the greatest number of sharks that you have ever seen together at one time?” asked an English lady in San Francisco of Captain Allen, of the New Bedford barque *Acorn Barnes*.

“Two or three hundred when we have been cutting-in a whale; two or three thousand in Christmas Island lagoon.”

Some of the hardy old seaman’s listeners smiled somewhat incredulously at the “two or three thousand,” but nevertheless he was not only not exaggerating, but might have said five or six thousand. The Christmas Island to which he referred must not be mistaken for the island of the same name in the Indian Ocean—the Cocos-Keeling group. It is in the North Pacific, two degrees north of the equator and 157.30 W., and is a low, sandy atoll, encompassing a spacious but rather shallow lagoon, teeming with non-poisonous fish. It is leased from the Colonial Office by a London firm, who are planting the barren soil with coconut trees and fishing the lagoon for pearl-shell. Like many other of the isolated atolls in the North Pacific, such as the Fannings, Palmyra, and Providence Groups, the lagoon is resorted to by sharks in incredible numbers; and even at the present time the native labourers employed by the firm alluded to make a considerable sum of money by catching sharks and drying the fins and tails for export to Sydney, and thence to China, where they command a price ranging from 6d. to 1s. 6d. per pound, according to quality.

The lagoon sharks are of a different species to the short, thick, wide-jawed “man-eaters,” although they are equally dangerous at night time as the deep-sea prowlers. The present writer was for a long time engaged with a native crew in the shark-catching industry in the North Pacific, and therefore had every opportunity of studying Jack Shark and his manners.

On Providence Lagoon (the Ujilong of the natives), once the secret rendezvous of the notorious Captain “Bully” Hayes and his associate adventurer, Captain Ben Peese, I have, at low tide, stood on the edge of the coral reef on one side of South Passage, and gazed in astonishment at the extraordinary numbers of sharks entering the lagoon for their nightly onslaught on the vast bodies of fish with which the water teems. They came on in droves, like sheep, in scores at first, then in hundreds, and then in packed masses, their sharp, black-tipped fins stretching from one side of the passage to the other. As they gained the inside of the lagoon they branched off, some to right and left, others swimming straight on towards the sandy beaches of the chain of islets. From where I stood I could have killed scores of them with a whale lance, or even a club, for they were packed so closely that they literally scraped against the coral walls of the passage; and some Gilbert Islanders who were with me amused themselves by seizing several by their tails and dragging them out upon the reef. They were nearly all of the same size, about seven feet, with long slender bodies, and their markings, shape, and general appearance were those of the shark called by the Samoans *moemoeao* (“sleeps all day”), though not much more than half their length. The Gilbert Islanders informed me that this species were also *bàkwa mata te ao* (sleepers by day) at certain seasons of the year, but usually sought their prey by night at all times; and a few months later I had an opportunity afforded me of seeing some hundreds of them asleep. This was outside the barrier reef of the little island of Ailuk, in the Marshall Group. We were endeavouring to find and recover a lost anchor, and were drifting along in a boat in about six fathoms of water; there was not a breath of wind, and consequently we had no need to use water glasses, for even minute objects could be very easily discerned through the crystal water.

“Hallo! look here,” said the mate, “we’re right on top of a nice little family party of sharks. It’s their watch below.”

Lying closely together on a bottom of sand and coral *débris* were about a dozen sharks, heads and tails in perfect line. Their skins were a mottled brown and yellow, like the crustacean-feeding “tiger shark” of Port Jack-son. They lay so perfectly still that the mate lowered a grapnel right on the back of one. He switched his long, thin tail lazily, “shoved” himself along for a few feet, and settled

down again to sleep, his bedmates taking no notice of the intruding grapnel. Further on we came across many more—all in parties of from ten to twenty, and all preserving in their slumber a due sense of regularity of outline in the disposition of their long bodies.

The natives of the low-lying equatorial islands—the Kingsmill, Gilbert, Ellice, and Tokelau or Union Groups—are all expert shark fishermen; but the wild people of Paanopa (Ocean Island) stand *facile princeps*. I have frequently seen four men in a small canoe kill eight or ten sharks (each of which was as long as their frail little craft) within three hours.

SOME PACIFIC ISLANDS FISHES

Of all the food-fishes inhabiting the reefs, lagoons, and tidal waters of the islands of the North and South Pacific, there are none that are prized more than the numerous varieties of sand-mullet. Unlike the same fishes in British and other colder waters, they frequently reach a great size, some of them attaining two feet in length, and weighing up to ten pounds; and another notable feature is the great diversity of colour characterising the whole family. The writer is familiar with at least ten varieties, and the natives gave me the names of several others which, however, are seldom taken in sufficient numbers to make them a common article of diet. The larger kind are caught with hook and line in water ranging from three to five fathoms in depth, the smaller kinds are always to be found in the very shallow waters of the lagoons, where they are taken by nets. At night, by the aid of torches made of dried coconut leaf, the women and children capture them in hundreds as they lie on the clear, sandy bottom. In the picturesque lagoons of the Ellice Group (South Pacific), and especially in that of Nanomea, these fish afford excellent sport with either rod or hand-line, and sport, too, with surroundings of the greatest beauty imaginable; for the little lagoon of Nanomea is perfectly landlocked, except where there are breaks of reef—dry at low water—which is as clear as crystal, and the low-lying belt of land is a verdant girdle of coco and pandanus palms, growing with bread-fruit and *fetau* trees on the rich, warm soil composed of vegetable matter and decayed coral detritis.

And then, too, you can look over the side of the canoe, or from an exposed boulder of coral, and see the fish take your bait—unless a breeze is rippling the surface of the water.

I usually chose the early morning, before the trade wind roused itself, as then, if in a canoe, one need not anchor, but drift about from one side of the lagoon to the other; then about ten o'clock, when the breeze came, I would paddle over to the lee of the weather side of the island (the land in places not being much wider than the Palisadoes of Port Royal in Jamaica) and fish in unruffled water in some deep pool among a number of sand banks, or rather round-topped hillocks, which even at high water were some feet above the surface.

When bent on sand-mullet—*afulu* the natives call them—I was in the habit of going alone, although the moment I appeared in the village carrying my rod, lines, and gun, I was always besought to take one or two men with me. One of the most ardent fishermen on the island was one Kino—a gentleman who weighed eighteen stone; and, as my canoe was only intended for two light-weights like myself, I always tried to avoid meeting him, for not only was he most persistent in his desire to see how I managed to get so many mullet, but was most anxious to learn to speak English.

On one occasion I fatuously took the monster out in my whaleboat to fish for *takuo* (a variety of *tuna*) one calm starlight night when the ocean was like a sheet of glass. We pulled out over the reef, and when a mile from the shore lowered our heavy lines and began fishing. For nearly a quarter of an hour neither of us spoke, then he suddenly asked me in his fat, wheezy tones, if I would mind telling him something.

“What is it?”

“Will you tell me, friend, what are the English words that should be spoken by one of us of Nanomea to a ship captain, giving him greeting, and asking him if he hath had a prosperous voyage with fair weather? My heart is sick with envy that Pita and Loli speak English, and I cannot.”

Forgetting my past experiences of my man, I was fool enough to tell him.

“You say this: ‘Good morning, Captain; have you had a good voyage and fair weather?’”

He greedily repeated each word after me, very slowly and carefully; then he asked me to tell him again. I did so. Then he sighed with pleasure.

“Kind friend, just a few times more,” he said.

I told him the sentence over and over again for at least a score of times; and his smooth, fat face beamed when at last he was able to say the words alone. Then he began whispering it. Five minutes passed, and he tackled me again.

“Is this right?—‘Good—mornin’, kîpen—ha—ad—you—have—goot—foy—age—and—fair wesser?’”

“That is right,” I said impatiently, “but ask me no more to-night. Dost not know that it is unlucky to talk when fishing for *takuo* and *tautau*?”

“Dear friend, *that* we believed only in the heathen days. *Now* we are Christians.”

He paused a moment, then raised his face to the stars and softly murmured, “Good—mornin’ kâpen—haad—you—you—have—goot—foyage—and wesser—and fair—wesser?” Then he looked at me interrogatively. I took no notice.

He toyed with his line and bent an earnest gaze down in the placid depths of the water as if he saw the words down there, then taking a turn of his line round a thwart, he put his two elbows on his enormous naked knees, and resting his broad, terraced chin on the palms of his hands, he said slowly and mournfully, as if he were communing with some one in the spirit-world—

“Good—mornin’—kâpen. Haad—you—haave—” &c., &c.

Then I sharply spoke a few words of English—simple in themselves, but well understood by nearly every native of the South Seas. He looked surprised, and also reproachful, but went on in a whisper so faint that I could scarcely hear it; sometimes quickly and excitedly, sometimes doubtfully and with quivering lips, now raising his eyes to heaven, and with drooping lower jaw gurgling the words in his thick throat; then sighing and muttering them with closed eyes and a rapt expression of countenance, till with a sudden snort of satisfaction, he ceased—at least I thought he had. He took up a young coconut, drank it, and began again as fresh as ever.

“Stop!” I said angrily. “Art thou a grown man or a child? Here is some tobacco, fill thy pipe, and cease muttering like a *tama valea* (idiot boy).”

He shook his head. “Nay, if I smoke, I may forget. I am very happy to-night, kind friend. Good-mor—”

“May Erikobai” (a cannibal god of his youth) “polish his teeth on thy bones!” I cried at last in despair. That shocking heathen curse silenced him, but for the next two hours, whenever I looked at the creature, I saw his lips moving and a silly, fatuous expression on his by no means unintelligent face. I never took him out with me again, although he sent me fowls and other things as bribes to teach him more English.

These sand-mullet are very dainty-feeding fish. They are particularly fond of the soft tail part of the hermit crabs which abound all over the island, especially after rain has fallen. Some of the shells (*T. niloticus*) in which they live are so thick and strong, however, that it requires two heavy stones to crush them sufficiently to take out the crab, the upper part of whose body is useless for bait. For a stick of tobacco, the native children would fill me a quart measure, and perhaps add some few shrimps as well, or half a dozen large sea urchins—a very acceptable bait for mullet. My rod was a slender bamboo—cost a quarter of a dollar, and was unbreakable—and my lines of white American cotton, strong, durable, and especially suitable for fishing on a bottom of pure white sand. My gun was carried on the outrigger platform, within easy reach, for numbers of golden plover frequented the sand banks, feeding on the serried battalions of tiny soldier crabs, and in rainy weather they were very easy to shoot. The rest of my gear consisted of twenty or thirty cartridges, a box of assorted hooks, a heavy 27-cord line with a 5-in. hook (in case I saw any big rock cod about), a few bottles of lager, some ship biscuits or cold yam, and a tin of beef or sardines, and some salt. This was a day’s supply of food, and if I wanted more, there were plenty of young coconuts to be had by climbing for them, and I could cook my own fish, native fashion; lastly there was myself, in very easy attire—print shirt, dungaree pants, panama hat, and no boots, in place of which I used the native *takka*, or sandals of coconut fibre, which are better than boots when walking on coral. Sometimes I would

remain away till the following morning, sleeping on the weather side of the island under a shelter of leaves to keep off the dew, and on such occasions two or three of the young men from the village would invariably come and keep me company—and help eat the fish and birds. However, they were very well conducted, and we always spent a pleasant night, rose at daybreak, bathed in the surf, or in the lagoon, and after an early breakfast returned to the village, or had some more fishing. It was a delightful life.

My canoe was so light that it could easily be carried by one person from the open shed where it was kept, and in a few minutes after leaving my house I would be afloat, paddling slowly over the smooth water, and looking over the side for the mullet. In the Nanomea, Nui, and Nukufetau Lagoons the largest but scarcest variety are of a purple-grey, with fins (dorsal and abdominal) and mouth and gill-plates tipped with yellow; others again are purple-grey with dull roddish markings. This kind, with those of an all bright yellow colour throughout, are the most valued, though, as I have said, the whole family are prized for their delicacy of flavour.

As soon as I caught sight of one or more of the sought-for fish, I would cease paddling, and bait my hook; and first carefully looking to see if there were any predatory leather-jackets or many-coloured wrasse in sight, would lower away, the hook soon touching the bottom, as I always used a small sinker of coral stone. This was necessary only because of the number of other fish about—bass, trevally, and greedy sea-pike, with teeth like needles and as hungry as sharks. In the vicinity of the reef, or about the isolated coral boulders, or “mushrooms” as we called them, these fish were a great annoyance to me, though my native friends liked them well enough, especially the large, gorgeously-hued “leather-jackets,” to which they have given the very appropriate name of *isuumu moana*—the sea-rat—for they have a great trick of quietly biting a baited line a few inches above the hook. *Apropos* of the “sea-rat,” I may mention that their four closely-set and humanlike teeth are so thick that they will often crush an ordinary hook as if it were made of glass, and as their mouths are exceedingly small, and many are heavy, powerful fishes, they cause havoc with ordinary tackle. But a fellow-trader and myself devised a very short, stout hook (1 1/2 inch of shank) with a barbless curve well turned in towards the shank; these we bent on to a length of fine steel wire seizing. They proved just the ideal hook for the larger kind of sea-rat, which run up to 10 lb., and the natives were so greatly taken with the device that, whenever a ship touched at the island, short pieces of fine steel wire rigging were eagerly bought (or begged for).

However, no leather-jackets, wrasse, greedy rock-cod, or keen-eyed trevally being about, the bait touches the sandy bottom, and then you will see one—perhaps half a dozen—*afulu* cease poking their noses in the sand, and make for it steadily but cautiously. When within a foot or so, they invariably stop dead, and eye the bait to see if it is worth eating. But they are soon satisfied—that round, pale green thing with delicious juices exuding from it is an *uga* (hermit crab) and must not be left to be devoured by rude, big-mouthed rock-cod or the like, and in another moment or two your line is tautened out, and a purple-scaled beauty is fighting gamely for his life in the translucent waters of the lagoon, followed half-way to the surface by his companions, whom, later on, you place beside him in the bottom of the canoe. And even to look at them is a joy, for they are graceful in shape, lovely in colour, and each scale is a jewel.

You take up the paddle and send the canoe along for half-a-cable’s length towards a place where, under the ledge of the inner reef, both *afulu sama sama* and *afulu lanu uli* (yellow and purple mullet) are certain to be found; and, as the little craft slips along, a large gar—green-backed, silvery-sided, and more than a yard long—may dart after you like a gleaming, hiltless rapier skimming the surface of the water. If you put out a line with a hook—baited with almost anything—a bit of fish a strip of white or red rag—you will have some sport, for these great gars are a hard-fighting fish, and do the tarpon jumping-trick to perfection. But if you have not a line in readiness you can wait your chance, and as he comes close alongside, break his back with a blow from the sharp blade of your paddle, and jump overboard and secure him ere he sinks.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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