

Friday, July 17, 1912

TERMINAL FIGHT WITH A SHARK

An officer on one of the ships of the United States Survey Service, relating this instance of his own rashness and narrow escape with his life. He waded in to the sea at Charlotte Harbor, (Fla.) to spear "stingarees, a fish like a flounder, but with a curious rat-like appearance, probably about three feet in width, two in length, with a "beauty of a tail," and soon the hunt became interesting.

The shoals extend out a mile in many directions in Charlotte Harbor, and in my excitement, had waded out full half that distance from the shore—at least a mile away from my men. The thought of danger never once entered my head, although the water was full of sharks, many of them twelve to fifteen feet in length. My feet and legs were bare, my trousers being rolled up as high as possible. But I had gone out some distance from that depth, the water being up to my waist, and not dreaming of peril was bent upon the capture of the fish I was pursuing.

Suddenly, but why, I could never comprehend, I turned back from the harbor. I never saw that stingaree again, for my heart almost ceased to beat, as I beheld a monstrous shark, the most beautiful I had ever seen, swimming in the water, coming in a direct line for the place where I was standing.

A feeling of horror pervaded me at once. Powerless, death-stricken it seemed, I gave one yell—shark!—and giving one desperate, agonizing look towards my men a mile away, I turned and sought upon the monster from which I expected the most horrible death. The agony and mental torture of that fearful moment can never be described. I expected the shark to make a dash for me, and above all, the cold, horrible glare of those small yellow eyes, fascinated me with a deadly terror.

In those short seconds I lived years of horror. To see that ravenous demon so leisurely consider his power, and I almost powerless, waist deep in water, and no weapon of defence but a common boat-hook. I seemed to shrink in nothingness when compared to my enemy.

He gave me but a few seconds to think or prepare for death, for quick as a cat he leaped through the water and seemed almost to spring from the water as he dived for my legs. I could scarcely hold the boat-hook in my trembling grasp, but as his body came within reach, I struck at it with the energy and despair with which a drowning person would act.

In a bath I committed my soul to God, and for the next few seconds became nearly unconscious. Whether the monster felt the point of my spear or not, of course I cannot tell. I presume, however, that he did, for he made no his ponderous jaws coming together with a rush and snap.

Passing full of rage, he dashed out into the harbor again, but not far, when he turned and began the same manoeuvres as before.

My feelings as he sprang for me, and of the revision consequent upon my looked-for respite, seemed to inspire me with new courage, and I felt that the cowardly shark might yet be balked of his prey. I gained an astonishing feeling of coolness and nerve and determined to present a firm front when he attacked me again, which I knew he would.

I began a retreat, stepping cautiously backwards, with my eyes fixed on the shark. Stealing a look towards the boat, I saw with joy that the men had got out of the beach, and were manning the oars.

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