

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE ISLAND

The trip to the island—Fishing—Frenchmen, Greeks and Chinamen—Sharks and bêche-de-mer—El Kori.

"Is the boat ready, Buralli?" I ask the Somal sub-inspector of police.

"Ha! Sahib, it is ready."

"Who are coming with me?"

"A sergeant of the water police, two boatmen, your orderly, your cook, your servant, and the Arab Syyed. I am sending the riding camels to El Kori to-night and they will await you there in the morning. You can cross from the island, where the Chinamen are, to the mainland near El Kori in half an hour."

"Thank you, Buralli. Good-bye!"

"Salaam, Sahib!"

Half an hour later we are all aboard, bound for the island near the French Somaliland border, where a party of Chinamen are collecting bêche-de-mer and shark's fins. With her nose pointing North of West, her dhow-rigged sail bellying to the fresh north-east breeze, the little government boat is soon making her seven knots. Syyed, the Arab,

has brought lines and hooks and is busy adjusting the bait. A small fish, a little bigger than a sardine, is attached to the hook at a special angle, so that it will spin as it glides over the water. Syyed, who works with the assurance of a past master of his art, binds the bait with a piece of palm-grass as a finishing touch. There is a twist of his arm and the line is trailing far out to the stern where it ends in a little silver streak on the surface of the blue water. The boat is small, the breeze is fresh, and the cook is feeling both afraid and unwell. He droops like a tired plant and all expression fades from his face until, with a sharp jerk of his line, Syyed begins to haul in. In a second he gives a cry of pain and almost drops the line: it has cut his finger to the bone. I grab in time to save the situation, and there is an exciting tussle. The line swings out left and back again right like a huge pendulum. I can feel it biting into the flesh of my hand, but haul away, and, with a swing, land a huge barracouta in the bottom of the boat. Then it is I learn that the cook, alarmed by Syyed's cry and thinking the boat was going over, had attempted to jump overboard. A heavy blow on the head from the water police sergeant's fist had caused him to change his mind. My remarks on his foolishness soothed him back to his former state of lethargic misery. The bait is bent again, the

line spins out, but nothing happens for some time. Syyed tells me of a fine box he hopes to sell me when we return to Zeila, and I am very interested, when whir-r-r-r goes the line. Syyed is not napping this time; he has the affair well in hand, but the line is all out, and he is making no headway.

"It cannot hold on much longer, Syyed, or something is going to break," I say, as I take a hand.

There is a sharp tussle and the line comes away. I watch Syyed hauling it in.

As soon as we can see we both ejaculate, "hook gone!"

"That was a whopper, Syyed."

"Yes, sir, a ray; they run to over three hundred pounds sometimes on this coast. The best way to get them is with a harpoon. One day I will take you off Sa'ad-d-din and show you sport."

We are running near an island now and the water is shallow, so the line is stowed away. Bump, bump, bump, we are aground. The men spring overboard and push her over a hundred yards of shallows and spring in as we reach the deep water. Syyed is making ready more bait when crash goes the bamboo yard and the sail collapses. It is lowered and freed as quickly as possible. Meanwhile I keep a stern eye on the cook, who informs me nothing in the world will

induce him to return in this boat on the morrow. A splint of sticks, evidently kept for such an emergency, makes a temporary repair of the broken bamboo, and a smaller sail is bent instead of the large one we have been using. No more fishing now; we anxiously watch the bamboo as the breeze stiffens, and we fairly fly through the water. At four-fifteen p.m. we are close to the Chinamen's island, just two and a quarter hours since leaving Zeila. It is a low sandy island, so narrow that I could almost throw a stone across it. From it, when the tide is out, it is possible to walk along a narrow winding riband of sand to the mainland.

As we come alongside the beach a dhow passes us a few yards away. It is from Jibouti, and a white man in the stern stands up to doff his cap. Syyed informs me he is a Greek fishing for a Frenchman who is camped on the island. Sure enough there is his camp, and a tall figure rises from a chair to give me a salute. Two Chinamen are waiting on the beach and ask me to drink tea, but, much as I dislike hurting their feelings, I cannot face the interior of their hovel, a construction of grass mats and driftwood. My own table is set up outside, and I drink their excellent tea and enjoy some very good cake. After that I talk for some little time before walking to the Frenchman's camp to pay my respects and satisfy my curiosity.

They have a nice clean little encampment, in which I enjoy the drink so hospitably offered. The Frenchman informs me that he employs natives to net fish, and pays them by the pound for what they bring to him. He provides the nets, of which he shows me a wonderful collection, ranging from drag nets imported from Marseilles to the African circular throwing net. A sporting little affair this latter. They cut up the fish—nearly all sharks—into strips, which they cover with salt for twenty-four hours, then wash in the sea, and hang in the sun to dry. The shark skins, fins, and tails are saved. The venture is as yet unproved, and the Frenchman informed me he hoped to find a market for the bulk of his dried shark's flesh at Zanzibar. I am doubtful if he will. Their catch to-day, they tell me, consisted of one hundred and thirty sharks. My face must have betrayed my inward doubt of this statement for I was conducted to a heap of tails and fins fresh enough to convince me of its truth.

It is getting dark and we sit down and chat.

"It is peaceful, Monsieur," said the tall Frenchman. "It is difficult to believe there is so much unrest in the world when one sits here at eventide."

I look round. Two natives are wading through the shallow water towards our island, and as they come they stop occasionally to throw the circular

nets they carry. They are making a good haul. Syyed is talking to the Chinamen, a hundred yards away; my servant and orderly are erecting my camp bed. A few fishermen are kneeling round camp fires cooking their evening meal. I can see all over the tiny island. Along the coast a red light, and then a white, becomes visible as the darkness closes quickly round us.

That is Jibouti. Perhaps there is a liner lying in the harbour, homeward bound, full of passengers going to Europe. There will be ladies and little children, and now it is nearly dinner-time. How far away and unreal it all seems. There is scarcely a sound. My companion is very silent. I am aroused from my reverie by the splash, splash, splosh, splosh, in the water of small fish trying to escape from some monster who seeks his evening meal.

"You have not answered my question, Monsieur," says the tall Frenchman. "It is peaceful here?"

"Pardon," I reply, "I did not realise it was a question, but even here there is war."

"How? Where?"

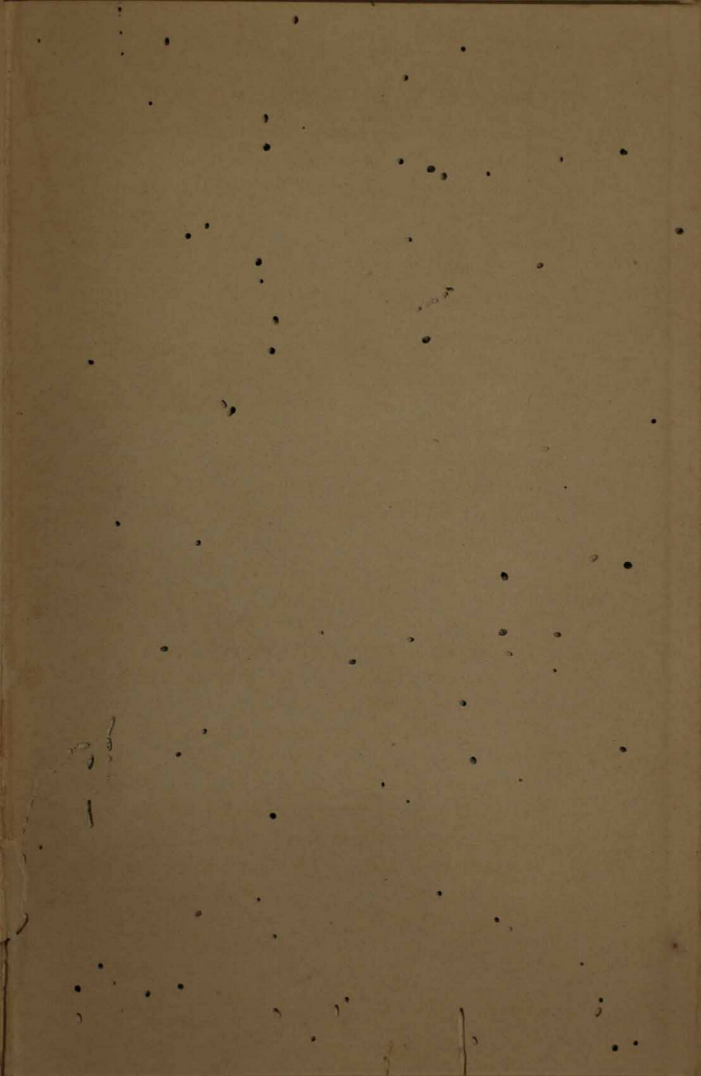
"In the waters!"

"True, and never ending war!"

"Were you fighting in France, Monsieur?"

"Yes!"

I



haul, but the biggest one was not more than three feet long. There were very few other fish, and they were mostly gurrum. There was some talk between my men and the fishermen.

"This," said the water police sergeant, picking up a shark eighteen inches long, "is a Sheiba (old man), he will not grow another inch!"

"Certainly not, he is dead," I remark.

"I mean he is full grown," replied the sergeant.

The fishermen said that was a fact.

"This," said someone else, picking up a shark with a head like a plane, on the sides of which projected his eyes, "is a youngster, and of all the sharks he is the worst kind."

In the centre of his flat head (and underneath) was his mouth, and it was easy to understand that he must, as the men explained, turn on his back to seize his prey.

For a solid half-hour I listened to yarns that would have given any writer of sporting fiction valuable material to work on, yet I believe they were in the main true. There was one of a pearl diver, attacked by one of these flat-headed monsters, which seized him by the face. How he struck out wildly with a pearl oyster he was holding in his hand, and by sheer good luck hit the fish on the eye, causing it to let go. Like a flash he struck out for the surface and was pulled out, just in time, by his mates in the





SYIED KHUDAR THROWING THE CIRCULAR NET.

boat. Not one gruesome detail was omitted, from the first attack to the ending, when the doctor sewed up the wounds. I heard of fights with sword fish caught up in nets. How the men's faces showed their hatred of these brutes that throw their cruel swords about in their struggles to get free, and woe betide the obstacle of flesh and blood that stops a blow. When they find a sword fish in the net the fishermen drop a noose over his sword and, hauling him close against the boat, beat him with poles until there is no fight left in him, when they haul him aboard and cut off his head.

But breakfast is ready and the sun comes up like a great ball of molten metal to remind me that the day will be too hot to allow of any waste of the precious morning hours.

Breakfast over a Chinaman produces a specimen of the sea slug (*bêche-de-mer*) in which I am so interested. It might quite easily be a banana turning black from over ripeness, judged from appearances at least. The skin appears to be rough, but is not exceptionally so to the touch. The Chinaman conducts me to a furnace of plastered mud in which is set a flat-bottomed pan which might once have been a low bath of the kind used in bedrooms. In this pan, he explains, the fresh slugs are roasted before being buried in the sand for twenty-four hours. They are then washed in the

the same moment being drawn gently back as its fingers release their hold. This ensures the full spread of the net, which opens out like the loop of a well-thrown lasso, the lead weights lying in a circle on the sandy bottom of the shallow water in which alone it is used. The right hand retains hold of a cord in the centre of the net which gradually takes the form of a spherical cone (as the hand is raised), the base of which is held to the bottom by the weights. The net is then gradually raised and these weights drag along the bottom until, at last, they meet, and in the folds of the net above them is the quarry that has been unwary enough to allow the near approach of the fisherman.

Before leaving the island I was curious to hear to what use the dried sharks' tails and fins are put. A Chinaman picked at a dried fin with his knife, exposing a number of white fibres within. These, he said, were what were eaten, and I was shown a biscuit tin full of the prepared article that was exactly like transparent shredded gelatine. It is used for thickening soups and giving a highly appreciated flavour to meat dishes. Nothing is wasted, I am informed, even the shark's liver being boiled down for oil, and good skins saved for fancy work. Yes! I heartily agree with that statement. In neither the French nor Chinese camp is there any sign of waste.