



The beauty of some of the South Sea Islands is proverbial, but perhaps none of them can boast of lovelier scenery than Valma Lava, the largest of the Banks group to the North of the New Hebrides. It possesses too a series of hot springs a bit inland from Port Patterson — but just now what I have to write about is of a place on the coast on the Western side of the island.

There is a small bay there, with a trifling amount of sandy beach at the end, and about a hundred yards or so from that little beach the cliffs rise perpendicularly about two hundred feet, and over this cliff a large creek empties itself, forming a magnificent waterfall. I had been there before the occasion I am recording, as it was a very convenient place for filling water casks, and I had never seen any natives near it. At the time of which I am writing, the beginning of 1861, I was mate of the Boston whaling barque "Desdemona," and on that voyage Captain Bates had his wife with him.

She succeeded in making herself agreeable to all hands, which is by no means easy for a woman to do when you consider the sort of crew a whaler often has. Ours was a mixed lot, of different nationalities. Some of the men were hardly worth their salt, but one exception to the rest was a full blooded American negro. His name was Jack Edwards, and he was one of the most powerful and most fearless men I ever came across.

Nothing afforded him greater pleasure than to fight and kill a shark, and perhaps no more exciting a scene could be witnessed than Jack slipping overboard to do battle with a fourteen footer in its own element.

Although it is generally thought that a shark, I mean a shark of any size, is always ready to attack a man in the water, such is not the case, for I have seen Jack for more than half an hour actually trying to get a big brute about fifteen feet long to attack him, and yet fail. On the occasion I am just now thinking of when "our nigger," as we sometimes called him, was tired of chasing and feinting with the monster and was coming up the ship's side, the shark swam right under him and Jack, seemingly without hesitation, jumped from the chains right on to him. But even that would not bring his sharkship to the sticking point, and he cleared out.

Well, to get on with my yarn. Nice cool fresh water, when you are on board a whaler in the tropics, is a treat, and one morning, when the ship was becalmed, I took my boat ashore at the suggestion of the skipper's wife to fill some small kegs at the little bay I have mentioned on the Western side of Valma Lava. Of course, the boat was "armed," that is with tubs and whale line, harpoons and lances, as you never know when you may come across a whale, so everything is kept ready. Jack Edwards was in the boat, and besides the ordinary crew we had a Valma-Lava native boy from Port Patterson.

It was this confounded black boy who rose the trouble. A skylarking young fellow he was from the time he had joined us until he found we were heading for Waterfall Bay, and then he wanted to jump overboard and swim back to the ship. Of course I objected to that, but why on earth he should be frightened to go with us was beyond my understanding. He could talk pidgeon English, and with some trouble I discovered that what we called Waterfall Bay, but which he designated by some unpronounceable native name, was a place avoided by the Valma-Lava natives, as danger and death awaited all who were so rash or adventurous as to risk a visit there. The place was strictly *tapu* as being abode of some mighty demon who destroyed, if he did not devour, every man who had the foolhardi-

ness or curiosity to go ashore there. Yet, according to this boy's tale, the monster was a marine one and was reported to be of such size and ferocity it could destroy a party of men, and did not confine its operations to dealing with one person at a time.

Notwithstanding the evident terror of the narrator — by the by we had given him the name of "Joker" on board — we had no intention of turning back; in fact I had been there before and had never seen or heard of anything to interfere with us. So we continued on our way.

Certainly we discussed the matter somewhat, and although one of the hands suggested that perhaps the fish, reptile or animal, called the sea serpent, had his home there, the rest of us concluded that probably some natives had been caught by a big shark, which had given rise to the tradition quoted by Joker. If we were right, then it was not likely the fish would attack our whale boat, and moreover had we not with us Jack Edwards, the very king of shark killers, and were we not armed to attack and destroy a hundred barrel whale? A shark, never mind what his size might be, would prove but a trifle for us to contend with. We pulled steadily on in hopes we should see the demon, and quite prepared to give a good account of him should he luckily turn up. We reached the end of the bay and landed and filled our water kegs without difficulty and without any adventure, then started back for the ship.

Now the captain's wife was not only partial to fresh water, but also to fresh fish, and I had brought with me two or three lines. Bearing this in mind I shot a gull for bait, and headed the boat over to the Southern side of the bay as a likely place to obtain some fish. As we pulled steadily along near the shore I admired, as I had done hundreds of times before, the coral formation, several fathoms deep. The stillness and extraordinary transparency of the water enabled us, by putting down our faces close to it, to see caverns and grottos of lace-like coral differing here and there in colour, and the tiny fish, mostly bright blue, but intermingled with some of a brilliant red, darting in all directions.

One spot, and it was not more than thirty yards from some enormous rocks which formed the shore line, particularly

attracted our attention, and we lingered awhile to gaze into the blue water and admire the wondrous formation. From the bottom of the submarine cave or basin over which we floated rose two columns joined together at the top so as to form an arch, the upper portion of which might be ten or twelve feet from the surface. Although irregular in construction it was extremely lovely, as if its tiny builders had designed it with the idea of proving the possibility of beauty existing outside of regularity. Even the rough fellows comprising my boat's crew admitted it was the loveliest thing in coral they had seen. One of them started the question of whether or not a man could dive down and swim through the arch, or if the water was too deep for such a feat.

Now, although we were only about a quarter of a mile, if as much, from the beach at the foot of the waterfall, Joker, the island boy, had to a great extent recovered from the terror he had previously shown, and he said he was sure he could swim through there and come back over the top of the arch if there was anything to be gained by so doing. One of the crew offered him half a fig of negro head tobacco if he proved his ability, and Joker accepted the terms and at once mounted the bow of the boat to make the plunge.

I should mention that the far side of the cavern beyond the arch was in deep shadow, and we could not see how far it extended, although we afterwards knew that it reached for some distance and beneath the large rocks forming the shore.

The black boy, with a smile on his face, dived head foremost from the boat, and we could see his body as he descended and swam under the arch. There we lost him. There was a little sign of a struggle, but the water was only slightly agitated and some bubbles came up, but poor Joker was only a thing of the past, and we stared at each other in surprise, wondering what had become of him. Jack Edwards said he thought it might be a shark that had taken him, only, if it were, then it must be a mighty big one that could take in the boy at one mouthful, or otherwise there would have been blood rise. We all agreed that the water through the arch was discoloured, but yet we thought it appeared different to what it would if tinged with blood.

"Jack," I said, "do you think we can do anything or must we go on board without exactly knowing what has become of the boy?"

"I don't know," he replied; "the water is clear again but I can't see anything of him. I think I'll go down myself and have a look. I was never afraid of a shark, and I'm not going to show the white feather now. Yes, I'll go, sir."

"Hold on, Jack," I said. "We have no shark hook with us, but I think our best plan is to pull aboard and get one and a good lump of pork for a bait. We can drop it down from that rock there right into the hole. That's the most sensible thing to do."

"No," I continued as the negro commenced to take off his singlet. "No, you must not try it now, but you shall have a chance later on when we come back, for come back we will by hook or by crook, and do our best to entice the shark out of his retreat and destroy him. Give way, lads, for the ship."

Captain Bates hailed us as we came alongside the "Desdemona." "Eh, Mr Hales, where's that native boy? Has he run away?"

"No, he has swum away, sir; but I'll tell you about it," I answered as I jumped on board, and taking him over to the other side of the ship while the water bags were handed on deck, I told the captain how the boy was lost. He was struck with the peculiarity of the boy's disappearance, and ordered another boat to be lowered, which he himself took charge of, and leaving the ship in the hands of the second mate we pulled for the shore. There was not a breath of wind and the sea was like glass, so in a short time we were back, and looked down at poor Joker's grave and the great coral arch.

The skipper had an enormous shark hook in his boat, and this, baited with a ten pound lump of pork, was landed and dropped down from the big rock which overhung the cavern, into the deep water below where we considered the shark most likely to be. The hook had a fathom of strong chain attached to it, and this was fast to a whale line, which, in its turn, was secured at short length to the loggerhead of the captain's boat.

Meanwhile my boat occupied its old position some thirty

or forty yards from the other, and Jack Edwards having removed his singlet and pants and with nothing on but the belt round his waist which held his two great sheath knives, was begging my leave to take to the water, when a shout from Number 4 (the captain's whaleboat) announced a bite of something at their tackle. Jack could wait no longer, but, with a sheath knife in each hand, his usual way of fighting a shark, slipped overboard. I made for the other boat as quickly as possible, for now the sea around it was nearly the colour of ink and violently agitated. In a few seconds we were alongside our Number 4 and just then what I took to be two enormous snakes, each apparently about twenty feet long, thicker at one end than a man's thigh, and tapering off to almost a point, threw themselves on board it.

The identity of our assailant was quickly determined, and the serpent-like tentacles of a giant octopus, for that was the trouble, were attacked with tomahawks and knives by the now frightened crews of both boats. Then one of the hands, a French Canadian, yelled out "c'est le diable," and over the bows of the captain's boat appeared the head of the monster, its wicked eyes gleaming and its enormous parrot-like beak attacking and tearing away the rail of the boat. Well may the octopus be called by some the "devil fish," for surely no devil, real or imaginary, or even his Satanic Majesty who is said to run the big fire office down below, could show more malignity than was shown in the diabolical expression in the eyes of this frightful brute.

The captain had the boat axe to his hand, and just as the third tentacle came aboard he made a blow at the monster's head, and there the axe penetrated and stuck fast, the captain being thrown back into the bottom of the boat. Two lances driven with the strength of desperate men failed to penetrate the armoured head, but fortunately just then a harpoon launched from my boat struck and entered the head of the octopus, who would willingly then, no doubt, have relinquished the fight, but found retreat impossible. The third tentacle, which was over Number 4 boat, was cut and hacked to pieces, and a fourth which showed itself alongside us was disabled by our knives

and axes. Gradually the strength of the brute failed, and at last the suction power of its tentacles, which had been holding on to the inside of the cave, failed, and we towed the thing, or what was left of it, into clearer and shallower water.

Two tentacles were intact. We had destroyed four, and of the other two, one was cut and slashed by the knives of our late companion, Jack, and the body of that brave but unfortunate negro was still encircled by the folds of the eighth. We quickly had the remains of poor Edwards in the boat, and a ghastlier sight I never saw.

Round him in the shape of a screw were the wounds made by the suckers on the tentacle of the octopus, and the monster's beak had left little of his head but the skull. The tentacles measured twenty-seven and a half feet in length. The largest suckers were the size of teacups, and the beak was close on to fifteen inches from point to butt.

We ran across no trace of Joker, in fact none of us cared to further explore what had been, possibly for a long time, the retreat of the greatest octopus or devil fish I have ever seen or heard of.

