

The Battle of the Monsters

(Continued from page 1.)

dorsal fin of a big shark. That croc. had evidently met a friend and was not anxious to renew the acquaintance. There are many crocodiles or alligators in the South Seas, especially in the Solomon Island and New Guinea groups.

It was the third day of the calm, and we lay with hardly a move. It seemed as if all nature had gone to sleep—no wind, only an occasional long swell telling of some disturbance thousands of miles away. The glass was steady; too steady; it seemed as if we had got into a place where there was never any wind or movement.

Away in the distance to the north, from aloft we could occasionally raise the tops of the coconut trees on Vaitupu, that top of a submarine mountain much higher than Mount Everest. Two hundred yards from the reef at Vaitupu the water is one hundred fathoms deep, and one mile out it is 3200 fathoms deep, so it can be seen that this must be one of the highest submarine mountains of the world, just poking its extreme top out of the water.

I was lying down in my cabin in the afternoon watch when the native bo'sun called me. "Come on deck, Ariki, plenty devil fish, big fella, too. By crickey, he the big fella."

I went on deck and witnessed something which probably no white man had ever seen before, and which scientists would have given untold wealth to see. Where before nothing had been in sight, the whole face of the ocean for about one square mile was now thickly covered with slowly-moving monstrous forms.

"What are they, bo'sun?" I asked; and as if they heard my voice, two large forms each erected fully ten feet from the water a huge pair of arms.

"Octopus," said I.
"Devil fish," replied the bo'sun, and in truth they looked like it.

As if by signal hundreds of the same huge forms followed suit, and the sight was weird and strange. Hundreds of slowly-moving arms waved grotesquely and uncertainly in the air, and as they advanced toward the ship, the sight was awe-inspiring. It was indeed the schooling of the octopi.

I had no fear that they would attack the ship—she was too big. They could do her no harm, and in a pinch we could lock ourselves in. Out of their element they were harmless, but in their own element, the water, they were indeed formidable and dangerous enemies. They came around the ship, and soon we were the centre of those wildly-waving arms and huge bodies. It was a weird sight. Thousands of octopi, the smallest ten feet long, and some with arms twenty feet long and as thick at the base as a man's body.

Huge devilish-looking eyes larger than ordinary saucers glared malevolently at the ship. I had ordered the native crew to keep away in their quarters, and we watched them from a safe vantage. We noticed that sometimes one would put his arms on the ship, but it was instantly withdrawn, as if there was something in the dry wood to repel the slimy limbs of the monster.

The whole school had passed away from the ship about four hundred yards and about four points on the starboard bow, when—"Good God, look astern," suddenly yelled the mate, and running aft we saw a wild and marvellous sight. The ocean astern of us was alive with swiftly-moving forms, some of stupendous size. Thrashing the sea as they came and even throwing their huge forms clean out of

the water in their excitement, they tore wildly along. On they came, and turning to the octopi we noticed a wave of excitement pass over the school, and thousands of huge arms were erected and started to thrash the water.

Then all at once the battle commenced. Huge forms sixty to eighty feet long threw themselves into the school and the water was lashed to fury. There was hell to pay. The octopi had been attacked by a large school of sperm whales. This is the largest and most vicious whale known, and the only whale that is feared by whalers. Rushing at the octopi with incredible speed, the cetaceans ripped and tore the huge forms to pieces with incredible rapidity. Huge forms bereft of their arms squirmed by, and still larger forms leapt out of the water, their entire bulk showing in the mad attack.

There must have been over two hundred sperm whales, and pandemonium raged. For over a square mile the battle raged. The huge glistening forms of the sperms as they charged, bit, and crunched their opponents to pieces, the sea lashed to fury, the wildly-moving arms and legs of the octopi as they thrashed the whales, the thud of the blows inflicted, the roar of the bull whales, made a scene and pandemonium that was indescribable. Then a new and fiercer element entered the scene. Shoals of sharks and whale-killers, attracted no doubt by the disturbance, attacked the octopi. These the octopi had a small chance with, but occasionally one could see the writhing body of a shark twelve or fourteen feet long held firmly aloft in the arms of some huge octopus. Killer whales attacked all indiscriminately, showing no favour to any, and the slaughter must have been terrible.

There was one grim fight that took place very close to the ship. One huge whale, about seventy feet long, had been cut out of the crowd by a school of killers, who made a common cause against him. Surrounded by merciless enemies who attacked him from all sides, he put up a marvellous fight. Rushing with open jaws armed with teeth at least one foot long, he soon put two of the killers out of action. One he had nearly cut in two—that one was out of it, and very soon was floating around dead. The other had attempted to fasten on to the lower jaw of the whale, but mistaking his distance, he crashed into the open jaws of the sperm, which immediately closed on him. That was another one out. Never still one moment, the big bull whale charged and bit and crunched. Thrashing the water with his huge tail, and roaring in his rage, he put up a lovely fight. He was a hero, but the odds were against him.

Throwing themselves clean out of the water, these big whale killers would soon come down with all their weight on top of the big whale, and so soon knocked the wind out of him. Underneath and around him were dozens of other killers biting, ripping, and tearing. Soon they had got his huge flukes, and as he half turned over they could be seen hanging on to him like savage dogs on to a kill. Harassed and bitten and torn from below, and

beaten and flailed from above, the poor old whale was having a monkey and a parrot time. He was outnumbered and outpointed, and there was only one end for him. As he rolled over defeated I raised my hat to him in respectful homage to an unconquerable spirit.

Still the main battle raged. Doubtless the octopi were getting the worst of it, for they had no weapon that could help them against these savage, merciless foes. But they were game also. Though ugly and vile in every respect, they had no fear. Slowly it dawned on them that they were being beaten, and so they did the only thing possible.

Suddenly they sank, and sharks and killers disappeared with them. It was a weird sight to see about 200 whales sound at once. Only the sperm whales could follow them to their cavernous retreats, where no doubt the remnant recovered from their many wounds. All of the whales save two had disappeared, and another one had evidently got more than he could swallow. Round and round in ever lessening circles he madly raced, and as we sprang aloft to watch, we saw him stop and slowly roll over. Then he tried to right himself, but he could not manage it, and he rolled over on his side. Thrashing the sea with his huge tail for a little while, he finally lay still.

Thousands, perhaps millions, of birds had been attracted to the scene, and were feasting on the remains of many octopi that were floating around. One large booby had settled on the body of a huge octopus which, though maimed and mangled and unable to move, still retained some small vestige of life. The bird attempted to pick the large six-inch eye of the octopus to pieces, but there must have been something compelling in its gaze, for the bird staggered back with startled cries and flew away.

A breeze springing up, we sailed over the battlefield in which the maimed and mangled corpses of the octopi were still floating, and we had a good look at the sperm whale. Inside his huge mouth and protruding from it was the huge body of one of the octopi. We put out the boat, and when we had satisfied ourselves that the octopus was not alive, we made a closer inspection.

The whale had evidently been choked to death, for the huge mouth was open to its fullest extent, and jammed open by the body and legs of a huge octopus of which half completely filled the mouth. The other half which had prevented the huge jaws from closing was squirming outside. It was a curious sight, and the legs, one on each side of the jaw, were locked together over the huge head of the whale. He had been choked to death, and lay there food for ever-increasing flocks of birds and schools of sharks and killers that were gathered around.

"I think we go, Ariki," said the native bo'sun, as one huge killer sidled up alongside our boat and looked with wicked eyes at us.

"I think so, too, bo'sun," said I, and, suiting the action to the word, we pulled for the schooner. And so ended the greatest battle of the giants of the sea that I had ever witnessed in all my voyages in the Seven Seas.

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