

JOHN CAMERON'S ODYSSEY

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ANDREW FARRELL

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CHARLES KUHN

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Captain John Cameron



existed by the hundreds, those mammoths, those titan-clawed crustaceans. As their name indicates, they live on coconuts: they climb the palms, nip off a nut, scramble down to retrieve it, strip away its dense husk, insert a claw into the soft eye of the shell, snap it open, and devour the meat. We found the animals' flesh delicious, yet it might be dearly bought, for one crab cut a man's thumb to the bone, and we freed our unhappy shipmate only by smashing the crab's claw between two stones (Note 61).

At Palmyra we had good luck shark-fishing, but we worked under handicaps. Among them was the shallow water near the island, which prevented us from landing and burying the carcasses of sharks as we had done elsewhere. When we dumped the bodies overboard we were, of course, militating against our own fishing, for the remaining sharks would be less disposed to take our bait so long as they could feast on their erstwhile playmates. Horrible cannibals, those fellows! More than once a hooked shark was bitten in two before we could land him.

When broken weather set in at Palmyra we sailed for Kingman's Reef, forty-five miles to the north, a scattered and jagged menace to shipping, a sinister place of coral rocks, twelve miles by six. Breakers were bursting everywhere when we sighted it. About the middle of the reef, seen through spume and spindrift, was a stranded bark. How she got there remains a puzzle to me: in that part of the Pacific there were oceans of room for the navigator. Afterward I heard that we had seen the *Lady Lampton* or the *Lady Head*, I forget which (Note 62).

The next leg of our voyage took us to Neckar Island, one thousand miles to the north. We found it an isolated

rock, two hundred and fifty feet high, fringed with heavy surf that made a landing difficult but not impossible: an unattractive place that did not hold us long. From Neckar we sailed for French Frigate Shoals, seventy-five miles westward, which I have already described in my account of the *Wandering Minstrel's voyage*. On one of the islets we pitched our tent and prepared for a long sojourn, provided sport should prove good, as it decidedly did. Numerous turtles gave us sufficient shark bait, and heaps of turtles' eggs, as many as one hundred or one hundred and fifty in one nest, furnished us food. With no little cunning did the reptiles construct and conceal their sand incubators, but we found them easily enough by probing with iron rods at promising places: yolk from a broken egg on the metal told us when we had struck home.

Life on that islet of French Frigate Shoals delighted us all, especially the baby, who crawled and tottered and cap-sized, to the accompaniment of excited crowing, into the yielding sand. How I wish I could cruise again to that good place, once more to see that clear sky and enjoy that perfect weather! It would add ten years to my life to escape from the red tape that enmeshes us civilized men, to flee from police, tax-collectors, landlords, swindlers, innumerable parasites that suck our blood. None of them infested our world of islands. At French Frigate Shoals, praise God, sharks were fish, not humans.

And what shark-fishing we had! What a prodigious haul we made one day! We were on one of the outlying islets, resting after a long row of six miles, when a shark's fin clove the water close to shore. One of my men

scrambled to his feet, baited a hook, and cast it into the water. It was snapped up instantly. Then began that colossal catch.

An eight-foot fellow was pulled in. With him came hundreds of others to the water's very edge, some, in truth, venturing so close that their thrashing tails stirred up sand. Peaceful a moment before, the sea was now in an astounding commotion: it seemed alive. Ravenous as they were, the devils pounced upon a hook as it struck the water, yet not before a momentary struggle had centered about the morsel of food. Indeed the sharks jostled as though they were humans. On the heels of such a tumult followed a greater while a catch was dragged ashore: about it darted the others, lashing the water to foam. So frenzied were they that some ventured to the beach itself. As they turned again for the water we caught them by their tails and hauled them, stern-first, upon the sand, while they squirmed and twisted their eel-like bodies almost double in ferocious attempts to bring their jaws to bear upon us and their steely eyes glared.

This novel method of catching sharks commended itself highly. Half the men, discarding their lines, stood by to grasp the maddened beasts and pull them high enough on the beach to prevent them wriggling back into the water. On the sand we had to leave them until they should be exhausted; we lacked both time and facilities, such as we had in the boats, for killing them. Still the school came, still we fought under a broiling sun, for two and one-half hours. Then we, and not the fish, called a truce: they had not fled, but we could do no more, for our hands were painfully cut and bruised by the sharks'

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hides and by our lines. Victors, yet beaten, we reclined panting on the sand, while multitudes of devils darted to and fro before our tantalized eyes.

On that beach lay one hundred and forty-six sharks from eight to fourteen feet in length. There they had to remain until the next day. By good fortune a favorable wind carried us back to the schooner; without that breeze I do not know how we could have made the six-mile



passage: rowing, at least, was out of the question. What a relief it was to soak our hands in hot water and apply vaseline and bandages! Next morning, when we returned to the islet, we found many of the tough brutes of sharks still vigorous enough to snap viciously at anything within reach, while others were half buried in sand from the violence of their dying struggles. Those still living were quickly dispatched; next came the task of removing the fins and tails and burying the carcasses, which required three days.

Once more we sailed: to inaccessible Gardner Rock, one hundred and twenty miles to the northwest; to wicked

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Maro Reef, one hundred and forty-five miles farther on; then to Laysan, sixty-five miles westward of Maro. By this time *Crusoe* of Laysan was dead, but at the island I found my old friends Captain George D. Freeth, in charge of the phosphate settlement, and his foreman, Max Schlemmer, who had returned with their Japanese laborers from Honolulu for the summer's work. That night I had news of Hawaii and of my cronies, many of whom were dead. On the next day I began repairs to a puzzling leak in the *Ebon*. By using a large loaded lighter I careened the schooner, to find that fifty square feet of Muntz metal sheathing had been ripped away, that the butt end of a plank was badly split, and that oakum near the butt was hanging in shreds. A swordfish had rammed the schooner and had driven his lance through three inches of Douglas fir and two and one-half inches of ceiling plank, besides the sheathing. Eleven and one-half inches of embedded bone testified to the tremendous force of the fish's thrust.

Our stay of a month at Laysan was broken by a round trip to Lisiansky, one hundred and ten miles distant, which Freeth wished to explore for guano deposits. On our second and final departure we again steered westward for Lisiansky. After a few days of shark-fishing there we turned to other work, killing seals and turtles and curing the meat. These stores were for a voyage to the Bonin Islands and Japan that I had now resolved to make. Why should I go to Japan? Reason enough: to see a new country, one painted in glowing colors by my Japanese mate, who had spent sixteen homesick years far from that earthly paradise. Once there I would sell the *Ebon* and stay on shore for a time. But Japan became and remains

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my home. What is the fate of our years? Chance sends us thither, a whim lures us hither; and soon, too soon, we travel no more.

From Lisiansky we sailed one hundred and seventy miles northwesterly to Pearl and Hermes Reef and on one of its



islets pitched our tent, but we did not remain long. Another westerly run of one hundred miles brought us to Midway. There we overhauled the *Ebon* thoroughly for the long voyage of two thousand one hundred and fifty miles to the Bonins, which lie five hundred miles off the coast of Japan. Now we were ready for the sea; we bade farewell to Midway, the last good-by that ever I shall say to that island, and steered for the Bonins. On the twenty-second day we dropped anchor in Port Lloyd, a spacious harbor of Peel Island.

Much of the history of the odd little archipelago is compressed in the name Bonin, which is a corruption of

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the Japanese "bu" (without) and "nin" (inhabitants). Japanese subjects are said to have discovered the group as early as 1592; but the islands, twenty in all, remained for more than two centuries without a settled population, and there was no regular communication with the world from 1635 to 1830 or thereabouts. At that time two Britons, two Americans, one Dane, and about twenty-five Hawaiians, among whom were a few women, visited the group with the aim of opening trade with Honolulu. On Peel Island they hoisted the British flag. Thereafter the population received slow accretions of whites and Pacific islanders.

In 1827 Britain had established a claim to the Bonins, but the United States had done likewise in 1823, and in 1853 Perry, the celebrated American commodore, bought land on Peel Island with the aim of establishing a naval station. When his right to do so was questioned by Britain, Perry retorted by taking possession of South Island, which had been visited in 1823 by an American mariner. What might have become a tangled problem was finally solved by the Japanese. They assumed charge of the entire archipelago in 1875,—evidently with the tacit consent of the British, who had relinquished their claim in 1861. A Gibraltar of the Far East could have been constructed there. Perhaps it is as well that neither Britain nor the States did anything of the sort. Even the least bellicose people (and the Japanese are hardly that) would have found it difficult to tolerate the presence of another power in the Bonins, or, as the Japanese know them, Ogasawarajima.

Britain's renunciation of the group greatly displeased

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the inhabitants, who regarded themselves as British. Their disapprobation became discomfiture when they were swamped by Japanese fishermen. Like a swarm of locusts, devouring everything in their path, came the Orientals. Time was, said the people, when Peel Island was thickly wooded; now it looked barren, and all the goats and deer that formerly roamed the forests had been exterminated. "We did not wish to become Japanese subjects, Captain Cameron," said more than one person to me. "We are taxed heavily; our young men are conscripted for the Japanese Army and Navy; we are little better than slaves."

My own relations with the Japanese officials were somewhat anomalous. Port Lloyd was not open to commerce. Why had I called? "We are in distress," I explained soothingly. "We need food and water." Each day I was interrogated; each day I flavored my replies with Scotch whisky, and the gentlemen of Japan departed purring and profuse with promises. The civilian population and I got along famously, the more because I effected two miraculous cures. My prescription of a tablespoonful of bicarbonate of soda, swallowed dry, brought back from the gates of death a man who was dying of hiccups; my other prescription, of a hot mustard bath and a rub for a child who was said to be dying of cholera, was no less successful. Thereafter my fame was positively prodigious: I was more than a physician: I was a worker of magic.

From the Bonins we sailed for Kobe, Japan, arriving safely and in excellent health after a cruise of two years (Note 63). It was a strange world to which we had come, a world of bamboo-and-paper houses, of little

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