Sport.

WITH A FISH SPEAR ON THE REEFS.

BY ANDREW BALFOUR, C.B., C.M.G., M.D.

All day long the great waves had burst upon the reefs in snowy splendour. The surges, smooth, vast and heaving, symbols of immensity and power, had rolled shorewards till their bases felt the barrier reef, the long line of sunken coral guarding the still lagoon. And then, from being mere mounds of swift-moving water masses, they had taken shape, first as rollers with convex summits and the sun gleam in their concavities, and then as breakers, huge liquid walls, blue as the tropic sky, irresistible as fate. Each in its turn reared itself till the horizon was hidden, curved magnificently as it rushed towards dissolution, a plume of spray flying from its foaming crest, lines of vivid white streaking its great smooth back, its incurved belly suddenly transparent as its bulk thinned, as its pace quickened, and then down it crashed, down in a flurry of spume and froth, slobbering, swirling and sucking till overwhelmed by the next of the charging company sweeping shorewards from the south.

All day long the thunder of the surf had been borne to the island by the steady salt breeze, a sea music wild and sad, and lonely as the long-tailed phaeton bird flying high and solitary on its way to the cliff ledges.

Now night had fallen, coming swiftly as it does in these southern latitudes, but still the song of the sea rose out of the darkness, as the mighty swell sweeping northwards from the antarctic broke tirelessly, monotonously, endlessly on the guardian reef. It promised to be dark, which was all to the good, but there was still more than a breath of wind, sufficient anyhow to ruffle the surface and to make the sport more difficult. At least so we were assured by the Lascar, and who should know better than that semi-amphibious expert? He was one of the lighthouse staff, and lived aloft on the summit of the cliff where the squat white tower was already flashing its warning far out to sea. Having descended the long grass slope on the landward side, a slope reminiscent of the South Downs, and on which sheep and donkeys pastured, he was now waiting on the sandy foreshore with his little band of helpers.

Like Simon Peter of old, we were going a-fishing, but in a manner not practised, so far as can be told, by that impetuous apostle, though it is probable that it would have been greatly to his taste for, as we know, he was a man of action, and activity is very needful if one is to be successful with the fish spear on the reefs.
We had already stripped for the fray, and were now arrayed in bathing dresses with woollies and jackets above them, and what the old Highland-man called "proof-waters" over all. Shoes with rope or rubber soles, and short socks to guard the ankles completed our costumes, and the Lascar distributed the fish spears, each with two barbed prongs, nasty looking weapons and rusty with immersion in the brine.

The Lascar was tall and bearded. On his head was an old fez, his lean nether limbs were shrouded in thin cotton unmentionables, and his feet were cased in rope yarn wound round and round them to save his skin from the cutting coral. His myrmidons were similarly protected, and carried torches made of sacking wrapped about stout sticks, while two of them bore tins of fuel in the shape of petrol.

One by one we boarded the boat by the gang plank and, shoving off, were afloat upon the shallow lagoon. Poling slowly across it in the darkness we could yet make out the mass of the island rising behind us. Where the breeze sighed through the filaoa on the level all was black and indistinct, but the dim outline of the cliff showed against the sky, crowned by the flashing light which came and went as it did years ago when Chinese Gordon, recking nothing of Khartoum and his fate, underwent upon Flat Island a period of quarantine, and beguiled his leisure by making of it a plan.

But we have no longer eyes for the main island for there in front of us is the islet of Gabriel from which the reefs stretch out and, as a sputter of rain drives down upon our bare heads, the keel grates softly upon a sandy beach. Discarding the mackintoshes we wade ashore, the water for a moment striking chill to the skin, colder than the rain drops which a moment before were pattering on our pates but which now happily ceased to pit the sea surface. Stand awhile and listen! Out yonder in the darkness, at no great distance, the sea is roaring on the reef. One can distinguish the crash of the comber and the slither and back-draw of the broken surge. What a fate to be cast upon that sunken wall of coral in time of storm and in the darkness! It is fathoms deep out there where the giant octopus spreads its tentacles and the great white shark pursues its quest. Dimly one can see the line of foam, and then all at once the night changes for the Lascar lights the torches. The sacking, drenched with petrol, flares to the match and in a moment all is bright around us while beyond is the outer darkness, a darkness almost to be felt. For a moment only; and then with eyes accustomed to the glare and the surrounding gloom we cross a sandy spit and step into shallow water.

Before embarking on this adventure we in our ignorance held the idea that it was a case of scrambling about amongst rocks and peering into pools, now in the briny, now out of it, something like a schoolboy's hunt for crabs on the coast at home. Instead, we found ourselves half-way up to the knees upon a plateau of coral across which the tide was streaming, running like a river, yet minus the latter's force. The sea surface was a
mass of ripples which to some extent concealed the view but as the Lascar held his torch aloft we gazed upon a fairyland, a strange sub-aqueous country, pitted and painted, a curious irregular gleaming track somehow suggesting pictures of the extinct craters of volcanoes in the moon. The prevailing colour was a bright creamy white but here and there were pink patches and in places where the water deepened into pools a wondrous glow gleamed in the torchlight. Mottled shells, strange weeds streaming on the tide, fantastic clumps of branched coral met our gaze as we viewed these submarine gardens.

There was, however, scant time to admire this strange world for almost immediately we caught sight of fish. Dazzled by the glare some of the smaller finny tribe were lying just below the surface, tiny creatures like sprats and little plump fellows the colour of ruddy gold-fish. The former we find we can take with the hand. The latter easily avoid the spear and dart away beyond the circle of light or take refuge beneath some stone or ledge. Suddenly we see a long ribbon-like, greenish-blue shape motionless and within range. It is a gar-fish, a harlequin of the deep, and we dart the spear at it. Away it flashes and after it speeds the Lascar at an amazing pace considering the nature of the reefs. Holding the torch aloft he actually gains upon his prey, then with a sudden lunge drives home the grains and raises the gar-fish pierced and dripping. The rapid rush has caused the torch to flare, the flames to spread unduly. He lowers and dashes sea water upon it till, hissing and spluttering, the flame is under control. Then the hapless quarry is shaken off into a sack and the hunt resumed. We have scarcely recommenced stabbing at small fish without avail when the Lascar, discarding his spear, stoops suddenly and next moment drags aloft in triumph a huge "cray-fish" which we had not so much as seen but which his keen eye had detected black and hunched upon the coral. Its legs wave abroad, its antennæ quiver and it protests with a strange kind of grunting squeak speedily smothered by the sack. For a moment we straighten ourselves and look about us. Afar off in the inky darkness is the glow of another torch marking where the rest of our party are busy with the sport and away beyond one can see a line of snowy-white whence comes the dull roar of the breakers. It is strange to stand in the torchlight and gaze into the outer blackness. Doubtless the Lascar knows where we are and we are thankful for the thought, as, without him, we have the feeling that we would indeed be lost.

To it again, however! Something dark goes scurrying off along the bottom and after it speeds the amazing Lascar, while, again like Simon Peter, we follow afar off, but doing our best to keep up with the chase. The Lascar lifts his legs high, splashing vigorously, seemingly as sure-footed as a chamois. His torch is raised, he has handed his spear to the boy with the petrol tin and scurrying, slipping and chuckling behind him we stagger in his wake, our eyes glued on the dark shape which glides along, twisting and turning, evidently in mortal fear, clearly in a mortal
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hurry. Once, twice the Lascar makes a pounce in vain, but the third time's lucky, and, stooping again like a hawk upon its prey, he holds aloft another squeaking "cray fish" under whose flexed tail we see rows of spawn shining orange in the torch glare. Spawn or no spawn into the sack it goes, while the Lascar grimaces and shakes his fingers dolorously, for he has pricked himself upon the crustacean's spiny carapace.

And now the fun grows fast and furious and after a few ineffectual prods we begin to tumble to the game, to gauge the refraction, to take toll of the fish. We are fairly amongst them and there seem to be no end of species. The Lascar beckons and points downwards. For a moment we see nothing and then discern a ruddy shape lying still beside a stone. We steady the spear and lunge into it and through it, there can be no doubt of that, and up comes a plump red mullet well and truly pierced.

A moment later another dart yields a vieille, or spotted rock cod. It is the vieille gris we have taken, the Sarranus with dark brown blotches on it, but later a lucky thrust secures a fine vermilion-red vieille rouge, a fat two-pounder, succulent and well-liking.

It is exciting work, this fish-spearing and we begin to shout and echo the hunting cries of the Lascar who is here, there and everywhere, pouncing upon "cray fish," driving his harpoon right and left and rarely missing his quarry. Now it is a curious pig-snouted fish, flattened from side to side and with black bars running across it, again it is a silvery mullet with a strange sucker-like upper lip adapted for grubbing in the sand.

At every step almost we disturb some bewildered inhabitant of the reef. Crabs, weirdly spotted, go scuttling along in wild alarm; we come upon star-fish spreadeagled on the coral, and bambaras abound, great fat repulsive sea slugs, like black sausages; at one time hunted by the Chinese of Mauritius and still esteemed by these lovers of strange luxuries, though now they no longer export cured bambaras as they used to do. Sea urchins lie tucked away in crannies and we avoid their spines though, protected as we are there is little danger either from them or the deadly laff, that hideous warty fish with poisoned spines which haunts the reefs and is justly dreaded by the bare-footed fisherman.

"By jove, there's a queer fish!" We lunge, strike something firm and wriggling, crush it into the powdering coral, feel it squirming and writhing, and, ere the water clears, hoist up a strange and struggling creature with a long horn projecting from its forehead, horizontally not vertically. The prevailing hue of this "rhinoceros" fish is a dull olive green, but there are yellow markings on it, and near its tail on either side are a pair of brilliant blue caudal spines placed one behind the other, their business ends directed backwards. In shape they resemble the stout and broad-based prickles of a rose-bush, and must prove effective weapons capable of inflicting painful wounds. Talking of wounds it is curious how expressionless is the eye of a fish. There is no evidence of suffering in it
even when the captive has been badly mauled by the grains. One is fain to hope that the fish do not feel much. Yet they are intelligent creatures as anyone must admit who has studied their habits, and one would expect from their nervous organization a certain delicacy. Undoubtedly, however, they are not sentient in the same way as a bird or mammal for which we are thankful even while we hunt them.

There are no true cray-fish on the reef but the bag of lobsters so-called, grows steadily bigger for the Lascar misses very few of them, though now and then one dodges him over rough country. For the most part we have not been submerged much deeper than the ankles, and it is remarkable how large a fish the shallow water will shelter, but now there is a talk of cateaux, the famous blue fish which, at a certain season of the year, the Lascar spears actually in the waves as the latter gallop shorewards. It is said he can whip one of these vivid parrot fish out of the body of a comber even as it darts along above the level of his head. To-night, however, there is no need for such gymnastics. We are after two, three and four pounders and to get at them cross a sand-spit and sally out upon another reef where the water is deeper and pools, some of a considerable depth, abound. At any moment now we may be up to the waist so it is well to "ca' canny." It is easier for the novice to spear the smaller fry in the pools for they take shelter at the bottom and can be detected hiding snugly below a ledge. Some, however, blend so marvellously with their surroundings that, were the Lascar not with us, we could never have detected them. Long practice combined with keen sight has given him a vision which an owl might envy, and as he wades along he points here and there, while he picks up unconsidered trifles which the torchlight has held for a moment fascinated and inert.

But suddenly he gives a shout and from a pool there rushes out a big fat shape of vivid blue. The glare has only been sufficient to scare it, for it is on the outer margin of the magic circle and is off for safety into the gloom. Vain hope! On its trail springs the Lascar. How he keeps his footing is a marvel, but fast as the fish travels, he travels faster, and in a few seconds the chase is over. Out flies the spear and next moment it is hove up with a really big fish on the end of it, a lumpy, surprised-looking, bright blue parrot fish, its flesh showing pink through the gash in its painted flank. They are fair eating these cateaux if not kept over long, but they are a soft fish and not comparable with the rock cod, the red mullet, the noble, deep sea capitaine, or the beautiful cordonnier, which is best taken with the net.

Very soon we are "spotting" cateaux on our own account for one cannot well miss seeing a cerulean mass the size of a small cod even if it lies hunched up against a lump of coral, blinded and motionless.

It is easy enough to spear the parrot-fish. One can advance the spear under water till the prongs are an inch or two from the prey and then a single lunge drives the points home behind the gills. There is a startled
flurry and we heave up the *cateau*, which looks more like a freak than a fish, what with its pouting mouth, its staring eyes and its amazing colour. There are green and red *cateaux* but here upon the reef we see only the blue variety. It is plentiful and soon we have a dozen and more.

When crossing from one reef to the other we had emptied our sack, for there is a limit to the fish which can be carried and so there is plenty of room for *cateaux* and cray-fish and anything else we may happen to come across.

But the torch is near an end and we feel we have had enough of slaughter. It seems the other party have come to the same conclusion, for, as we quit the reef, we see their torch not far away and hear them splashing towards the sand-pit.

Soon we foregather and find they have been equally lucky, for, though they lacked the Lascar they were not without experience of the sport, and in any case appear to have secured even a greater variety than had fallen to our share. They had encountered an eel, a formidable brute with nasty teeth and the proverbial tenacity of its kind, but after putting up a fight he had yielded up the ghost and lay mingled with the scaled and the scaleless.

Tired, but cheerful, we bundle into the boat and cross the lagoon. On the beach of Flat Island—a curious misnomer—we empty out our spoils, some eighty pounds of fish, and light a torch and gaze at the trophies. Already the glory is departing from them; the colours are fading, the eyes are dull, the tails are drooping. Only the "cray-fish" remain unchanged. They are still alive, clashing feebly as they move, perhaps wondering what they are doing in this gallery, let us hope unconscious of their fate and unaware of how they will change from speckled bluish-black to speckled red.

The torch is quenched, the Lascar gathers the spears, the fish are sacked again and we plough through the shelly sand to where the night breeze is still rustling in the resinous filaos, while behind us out of the darkness from the fairyland of the sea rises the song of the breakers tumbling eternally upon the reefs.