

## CHAPTER VI

### THE GIANT RAY

IN marching order the professor presented a complex appearance. A greenish veil hung from the rim of his swollen and spotless helmet to his shoulders, which were clad in a coat pitted with an extraordinary number of pockets. On the lower half of his person he wore tweed knickerbockers and cloth puttees with white spats. A minnow net and a camp-stool with a pneumatic seat were bound upon his back, and in his hands he carried a sheaf of rods and a repeating rifle.

By his side young Leach, with a bit of shark-line round his waist to keep his shirt down and his trousers up, and with plenty of tanned skin visible, seemed a figure of barbarism, but the contrast was only external. The Boston professor and the brown Floridian were pupils at the same school, and youth knew at first hand some of the

wonderful facts that age had met only in textbooks.

The professor was not an angler in the sporting sense of the term. Sport for sport's sake was quite beneath his learned notice. He had come to the Anchorage to study the marine life of the lagoon, and he cared not a whit for the glitter and gaiety of the hotel, immersing himself in his books of an evening, and sallying forth every day immediately after an early breakfast for his lonely trips along the shore.

On several occasions he met Bob, who was on his way to the hotel where he was now often employed as guide to the tarpon fishers. The tall, strong boy whose eye was as keen as a heron's impressed the scientist agreeably, and one day he stopped him on the beach and rather abruptly offered him three dollars a day for his services.

Five dollars would not have been enough to banish the scorn Bob felt at first sight of the green veil and white spats, but when the professor, picking up a shell at their feet, told undreamed of wonders about it, he surrendered completely. This man was a lover of nature like himself, and had the knowledge that Bob longed

for. He would have gone with him for nothing.

Those were pleasant days. They explored reef and shore and pothole, and gave each other of their knowledge and learned new lessons together. One day they dropped anchor on a shoal between two mangrove points, where the yellow glint of sand quivered up through the water. It was warm there and protected, and many smaller species of fish swam busily about in its comparative quiet. It was good collecting-ground. The professor, with eyes snapping behind the green veil, dropped a close-meshed seine over the side and began to draw it through the water at the end of a long bamboo rod.

Perhaps the light disturbance of its passage was the attraction. At any rate, he had made but two or three attempts when a broad under-water shadow drew down upon the launch and paused below the net, which the professor in his curiosity held motionless.

“What is that?” he asked, and pointed.

Bob looked over the gunwale with no more than idle interest.

“What did you see? Where?” he said. The

shadow stirred at the moment, became more distinct and opaque, and the professor gazed down with startled eyes at the rising bulk of the most repulsive fish he had ever seen.

"It's the devil!" exclaimed Bob, stepping back from the gunwale.

The professor had lost his ruddy color.

"*Manta birostris!*" he breathed. He caught Bob by the sleeve. "What are those big spots? What — they're eyes! Look at them!"

The gigantic ray rose until a scant film of water protected its back, and peered upward with cold eyes set shallow and wide apart. For a moment it lay there, undulating like a sail in light air; then with a supple folding of its huge pancake body, it curved downward and became a shadow again, that drifted over the wavering yellow bottom and disappeared.

The professor drew a long and satisfied breath, and looked up at the sun, then across the topaz-hued water.

"Nature is wonderful!" he said, gently. "We must get that fellow."

"Get the devil-fish!" cried Bob.

"Certainly," said the professor. "I've seen

pictures and read descriptions, but —” He waved the memory of them aside contemptuously. “Bob, I never imagined anything like that since I was a small boy afraid of the dark. Look here.”

He held out his hand, and his fingers danced like the prongs of a tuning-fork.

“Um! You-all are scared,” said Bob appreciatively.

“Interested, Bob! Excited!” cried the professor. “I don’t know whether I’m afraid or not. It’s immaterial. A ray twenty feet across! I must get that fish, dissect him, know every inch of his monstrous body before I do anything else. Will you help me?”

Bob’s eyes suddenly glowed.

“Sure I’ll help you! You’re game, all right, professor. This shoal would be a heap nicer if we beached that old devil somewheres.”

The ray, apparently so open in its movements, proved a difficult quarry. It seemed to have none of the activity, the daring impetuosity of the game fishes. Bob and the professor, quartering back and forth across the shoal, with the engine down to the quietest notch, saw nothing

rise to their mullet and glistening squares of pork but an occasional dull sand-shark. Somewhere, basking placidly upon the bottom, lay the devil-fish, and doubtless, with more or less regularity, it moved about in the search for food, but the occupants of the launch failed to detect its presence.

Day after day went by. The professor's face grew longer behind the green veil. His time was limited, and in this paradise for collectors there was much that he was neglecting.

Every slow crane croaking overhead, every necklace of drops flung up by a leaping fish, every prolific patch of sea vegetation roused impulses that he had to quell. The devotees of science must be dogged.

"There is so much, so much!" sighed the professor. "Bob, boy, I envy you all this. What a field to work in!"

Bob yawned. He was lolling in the stern, his fingers clutching the cord, on the farther end of which a mullet was fastened. It seemed such fruitless business.

"We ain't doing much now, sir," he said, lazily. "I reckon that old devil's gone up No'th;

just keeping his left fin close to shore, so's he can kind of feel where he is. No trunk to carry and no ticket to — to — get!"

He broke off, every flaccid line suddenly stiffening, and eyed the water close abeam, which had grown opaque, as if struck by a slant of wind. But there was no wind and the surface was glassy.

Very quietly Bob leaned forward and stopped the engine. The dusky patch darkened, grew sharp in outline, and then the devil lay awash upon the surface, staring at the launch. Its huge, wing-like appendages stretched beyond both bow and stern.

"Give it to him!" said Bob, in a shrill whisper, and rose, harpoon in hand.

It was impossible to miss so big a mark. The lance struck the fleshy back, and sank as if into blue mud. The professor, with his feet wide apart, rattled out a couple of shots from the magazine rifle.

The ray struck out with one great wing and then with the other, lashing the water white and throwing spray clear over the launch. Before the eddies had smoothed, it was gone. The

next moment it shot up ahead, broad as a sail, the harpoon-line streaming behind it. As it hung for a second, flapping, the professor fired again.

"Look out for a rush!" cried Bob, and reversed the engine.

The ray fell back with a resounding slap, and instantly the line leaped over the bow. The professor hardly had time to brace himself before the shock came. The line snapped taut, and the launch, in spite of her reversed engine, sprang forward, two sheets of water flaring from her depressed nose.

"He'll tear the bow out of her!" bawled Bob. "She won't stand it, sir."

The professor, soaked with flying brine, roared back at him:

"I'll buy a new one! Sit tight there, Bob!"

It was smooth in the shallow cove, and fortunately the great ray did not try to head toward the sea. In rough water the launch must have filled or capsized in that terrific rush.

The devil-fish drove straight for the mangrove point, as if to hurl himself upon the sedgy flat — a half-mile in less than a minute. And then, as suddenly as it had bolted, the line fell slack.

The launch, half-full of water, steadied to the kick of her propeller. Bob stopped the engine, and she lay drifting and spent.

The professor shook himself and peered cautiously about.

"I don't like this," he said. "Where is he?"

"I'm glad we're near shore," said Bob.

The bottom here was muddy and the water opaque. They could not see below the surface. The line hung over the bow limp and motionless. A heron rose from the sedge and flapped away, trailing its long legs. A drum-fish boomed solemnly; but the giant ray gave no sign.

The professor moved uneasily.

"There's plenty of horse-power left in that brute yet. This waiting's unpleasant."

"Look at the line!" said Bob, softly.

It was moving, almost as if caught by some quiet current. It ran out very slowly from the bow, then swung to starboard and passed astern, lengthening foot by foot. It was so gentle, so unlike the former evidences of the huge fish's power, that it chilled the nerves of the watchers. It seemed as if the creature were meditating some

crafty plan and working it out with human cunning.

The professor followed the moving line with the muzzle of his rifle.

"I think I hit him that last time," he said. "Big as he is, I don't see how he can digest three of these long bullets. They'll rip their way through a foot of solid oak."

"Here he comes! Look!" Bob pointed with a shaking finger.

The line had swung back abeam and slackened. Bloody bubbles were rising and cracking on the surface, and the water itself seemed arching upward with the quick rise of the huge bulk.

But when the ray appeared, it backed off and began to circle the launch, rasping the tightened line along the gunwale.

"Cut away, Bob," said the professor. "If that line catches on anything, he'll upset us in a minute."

Bob severed the line with his clasp-knife, but the ray continued to circle. Round and round the launch it swam, like a tiger creeping upon its prey. Four times the professor fired at it,

and the vicious spat of the bullets told that he had not missed.

"Toss me that box," he said. "I think that beast means to rush us."

He tore open the fresh box of cartridges, and hastily filled the magazine.

"I reckon we'd better run for it," said Bob, with a white face, and opened the engine to her highest speed.

The launch surged forward, heading for the near line of sedge. At the moment the ray was astern, moving very quietly; but as it heard the swash of the propeller, and caught its meaning, its tactics changed. It shot forward with tremendous rapidity, passing the boat as if it were anchored. Then it wheeled, with an up-toss of water, and seemed to gather itself for a rush.

Bob threw over the tiller, but before the sluggish launch could turn, the ray was upon them. Charging furiously, it sprang clear of the water, outspread like a gigantic bat, its enormous mouth distended and its two great fleshy fins flapping. As Bob and the professor sprang overboard, the

ray fell upon the launch, smothering it and beating its broken timbers under water.

Bob had taken a long dive over the side. When he came to the surface there was no trace of launch or devil-fish except the violent agitation of the water. But the professor's head was visible, minus hat and veil, and it nodded at him. Without a word the two turned and swam in toward the sedge close by, and crawled, dripping, among its crackling stems.

The professor wrung himself out sadly.

"What a pity he got away from us!" he said.

"Why, I reckon we got away from him!"

Bob's tone was rueful as he stared at the spot where the launch had been.

The professor smiled in spite of his disappointment.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "But I've lost a specimen I wanted very badly. And now I've got to pay our friend Brown for his launch."

"It wasn't worth much," said Bob, walking out on the firm sand. "He couldn't get a regular fisherman to use it at any price."

Getting no reply, he turned round and saw the professor rooted in the sedge, glaring through his wet spectacles at an agitated patch of water close in shore. Bob took one quick look at it.

"Better come up here," he called. "It looks like that was the old devil again."

The professor stood for a moment motionless. Then he suddenly wheeled with a startled exclamation, and came tearing through the water to the beach. Spinning on the surface in what were evidently its death throes was the great ray. The flapping of its huge membranous wings drove a series of waves through the bending sedge, and up the beach to Bob's feet.

The professor had hardly reached firm land when the spinning ceased abruptly. The ray seemed to rise higher out of the water, and they could see it shudder as if the end were near. But the huge organism was not to accept its quietus without a last struggle. It leaped ahead, blind to the direction in which it was going; mowed a wide path through the sedge, and rammed itself hard and fast on the foreshore, where its vast, dusky bulk lay almost entirely exposed as the wave carried forward by its rush

receded. Its cavernous slit of a mouth opened and belched forth a foamy mass of water; its great fleshy wings rose and fell in a long quiver. Then it seemed to spread itself flaccidly on the mud, as loose and boneless as a dead jelly fish.

The professor slumped down on the sand as if his legs had weakened under him.

"By Humbolt!" he exclaimed, and rocked back and forth. "If I don't make a report out of this that will wake up the Ichthyological Society then I'll resign. The old devil jumped right up on the operating table, so to speak. I'll know the color of his inside before tonight. How far are we from home?"

"Not much of a piece," said Bob. "I reckon about the biggest end of an hour if we take the high beach and cut across the necks of those two points yonder."

"Well, I'm going back for my tools," said the professor, rising. "But first we'll shake on our luck. Bob, my boy, this has been a great day."

They shook hands warmly. The professor cut a humorous figure, hatless and bald, his odd clothes dripping salt water and one putty in a

coil about his ankle. But Bob thought only of the man's pluck and of the charm of his genial, scientific mind. He dreaded to think that their delightful days were almost over.

"You must come down again, sir," he said, wistfully. "I'll be your boatman any time."

The professor gripped Bob's hand firmly.

"We'll shake on that, too, my boy," he said.