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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COLONIAL MORTUARY BARD; "REO," THE FISHERMAN; AND THE BLACK BREEM OF AUSTRALIA ***

***THE COLONIAL MORTUARY
BARD;***

"REO," THE FISHERMAN;

**and THE BLACK BREEM OF
AUSTRALIA**

By Louis Becke

T. Fisher Unwin, 1901

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THE COLONIAL MORTUARY BARD

A writer in the *Sydney Evening News* last year gave that journal some amusing extracts from the visitors' book at Longwood, St. Helena. If the extracts are authentic copies of the original entries, they deserve to be placed on the same high plane as the following, which appeared in a Melbourne newspaper some years ago:—

*"Our Emily was so fair
That the angels envied her,
And whispered in her ear,
'We will take you away on Tuesday night!'"*

I once considered this to be the noblest bit of mortuary verse ever written; but since reading the article in the Sydney paper I have changed my opinion, and now think it poor. Bonaparte, however, was a great subject, and even the most unintelligent mortuary verse-maker could not fail to achieve distinction when the Longwood visitors' book was given up unto him. Frenchmen, especially, figure largely. Here, for instance:—

*"Malidiction. O grand homme!
O grand Napoleon!
Mais la France et toi aont venge-
Hudson Lowe est mort!"*

The last line is so truly heroic—French heroic. It instantly recalled to me a tale told by an English journalist who, on a cycling tour in France just after the Fashoda crisis, left his "bike" under the care of the proprietor of an hotel in Normandy. In the morning he found the tyres slashed to pieces, and on the saddle a gummed envelope, on which was bravely written, "Fashoda." This was unintentional mortuary poetry. The gallant Frenchman who did the daring deed when the owner of the "bike" was asleep did not realise that the word itself was a splendid mortuary epic for French aspirations generally.

Then comes something vigorous from one "Jack Lee-Cork," who writes:—

*"The tomb of Napoleon we visit to-day,
And trod on the spot where the tyrant lay;
That his equal again may never appear,
'Twill be sincerely prayed for many a year."*

The masters and officers of some of the whale-ships touching at St. Helena seem to have made pilgrimages to Longwood. Mr. William Miller, master of the barque *Hope*, of New Bedford, writes that he "visited the remains of the greatest warrior of the day, interred for twenty years." Then he breaks out into these noble lines:—

*"Here lies the warrior, bravest of the brave,
Visited by Miller, God the Queen may save."*

As a Britisher I shake your hand, William. When you wrote that, forty years ago, American whaling or any other kind of skippers did not particularly care about our nation; but you, William, were a white man. How easily you might have said something nasty about us and made "brave" rhyme with "grave"! But you were a real poet, and above hurting our feelings.

Captain Miller was evidently accompanied by some of his crew, one of whom contributes this gem of prose:

—
"Louis F. Waldron, on bord the barke hope of nubedford, its boat steer, has this day been to see honey's tomb; we are out 24 munts, with 13 hundred barils of sperm oil."

All greasy luck attend you, honest Louis, boatsteerer, in the shades beyond. You wielded harpoon and lance better than the pen, and couldn't write poetry. Your informing statement about the "ile" at once recalled to memory an inscription upon the wooden head-board of the grave of another boat-steerer which in 1873 was to be seen at Ponapè, in the Caroline Islands:—

*"Sacred to Memory of Jno.
Hollis of sagharbour
boatsterer of ship Europa of new
Bedford who by will of
almity god died of four ribs stove in by a
off pleasant island north pacific
4.17.69."*

Sailors love the full-blooded, exhaustive mortuary poem as well as any one, and generally like to describe in detail the particular complaint or accident from which a shipmate died. Miners, too, like it. Many years ago, in a small mining camp on the Kirk River, in North Queensland, I saw the following inscription painted on the head-board of the grave of a miner who had fallen down a shaft:—

*"Remember, men, when you pass by,
What you are now, so once was I.
Straight down the Ripper No. 3 shaft I fell;
The Lord preserve my soul from hell."*

On the Palmer River diggings (also in North Queensland) one William Baker testified to his principles of temperance in the following, written on the back of his "miner's right," which was nailed to a strip of deal from a packing-case:—

*"Bill Baker is my name,
A man of no fain,
But I was I of the First
In this great Land of thirst
To warn a good mate
Of the sad, dreadful fate,
That will come to him from drink.
—Wm. Baker of S. Shields, England."*

But let me give some more quotations from the Longwood visitors' book. Three midshipmen of the *Melville* irreverent young dogs, write:—

"We three have endeavoured, by sundry potations of Mrs. T——'s brandy, to arrive at a proper pitch of enthusiasm always felt, or assumed to be, by pilgrims to this tomb. It has, however, been a complete failure, which I fear our horses will rue when we arrive at the end of our pilgrimage.—Three Mids. of the *Melville*."

That is another gross insult to France—an insult which, fortunately for England, has escaped the notice of the French press. And now two more extracts from the delicious article in the Sydney paper:—

"William Collins, master of the *Hawk* of Glasgow, from Icaboe, bound to Cork for orders. In hope never to have anything to do with the dung trade! And God send us all a good passage home to old England. Amen! At Longwood."

I sympathise with *you*, good William! You describe the guano-carrying industry by a somewhat rude expression; but as a seafaring man who has had the misfortune to be engaged in the transportation of the distressful but highly useful product, I shake your hand even as I shake the greasy hand of Mr. William Miller, the New Bedford blubber-hunter. My benison on you both.

The last excerpt in the book is—

"One murder makes a villain, millions a hero;"

and underneath a brave Frenchman writes—

"You lie—you God-dam Englishman."

"REO," THE FISHERMAN

'Reo was a short, squat Malayan, with a face like a skate, barring his eyes, which were long, narrow slits, apparently expressing nothing but supreme indifference to the world in general. But they would light up sometimes with a merry twinkle when the old rogue would narrate some of his past villainies.

He came to Samoa in the old, old days—long before Treaties, and Imperial Commissioners, and other gilded vanities were dreamt of by us poor, hard-working traders. He seemed to have dropped from the sky when one afternoon, as Tom Denison, the supercargo, and some of his friends sat on Charley the Russian's verandah, drinking lager, he marched up to them, sat down on the steps, and said, "Good evening."

"Hallo," said Schlüter, the skipper of the *Anna Godeffrey*. "Who *are* you? Where do you come from?"

'Reo waved a short, stumpy and black clay pipe to and fro, and replied vaguely—

"Oh, from somewhere."

Some one laughed, surmising correctly enough that he had run away from a ship; then they remembered that no vessel had even touched at Apia for a month. (Later on he told Denison that he had jumped overboard from a Baker's Island guano-man, as she was running down the coast, and swum ashore, landing at a point twenty miles distant from Apia. The natives in the various villages had given him food, so when he reached the town he was not hungry.)

"What do you want, anyway?" asked Schlüter.

"Some tobacco, please. And a dollar or two. I can pay you back."

"When?" said Hamilton the pilot incredulously.

The pipe described a semicircle. "Oh, to-morrow night—before, perhaps."

They gave him some tobacco and matches, and four Bolivian "iron" half-dollars. He got up and went across to Volkner's combined store and grog shanty, over the way.

"He's gone to buy a bottle of square-face," said Hamilton.

"He deserves it," said Denison gloomily. "A man of his age who could jump overboard and swim ashore to this rotten country should be presented with a case of gin—and a knife to cut his throat with after he has finished it."

In about ten minutes the old fellow came out of Volkner's store, carrying two or three stout fishing-lines, several packets of hooks, and half a dozen ship biscuits. He grinned as he passed the group on the verandah, and then squatting down on the sward near by began to uncoil the lines and bend on the hooks.

Denison was interested, went over to him, and watched the swift, skilful manner in which the thin brown fingers worked.

"Where are you going to fish?" he inquired.

The broad, flat face lit up. "Outside in the dam deep water—sixty, eighty fa'am."

Denison left him and went aboard the ancient, cockroach-infested craft of which he was the heartbroken supercargo. Half an hour later 'Reo paddled past the schooner in a wretched old canoe, whose outrigger was so insecurely fastened that it threatened to come adrift every instant. The old man grinned as he recognised Denison; then, pipe in mouth, he went boldly out through the passage between the lines of roaring surf into the tumbling blue beyond.

At ten o'clock, just as the supercargo and the skipper were taking their last nip before turning in, the ancient slipped quietly alongside in his canoe, and clambered on deck. In his right hand he carried a big salmon-like fish, weighing about 20 lbs. Laying it down on the deck, he pointed to it.

"Plenty more in canoe like that. You want some more?"

Denison went to the side and looked over. The canoe was loaded down to the gunwale with the weight of fish—fish that the lazy, loafing Apian natives caught but rarely. The old man passed up two or three more, took a glass of grog, and paddled ashore.

Next morning he repaid the borrowed money and showed Denison fifteen dollars—the result of his first night's work in Samoa. The saloon-keepers and other white people said he was a treasure. Fish in Apia were dear, and hard to get.

On the following Sunday a marriage procession entered the Rarotongan chapel in Matafele, and Tetarreo (otherwise *Reo) was united to one of the prettiest and not *very* disreputable native girls in the town, whose parents recognised that 'Reo was likely to prove an eminently lucrative and squeezable son-in-law. Denison was best man, and gave the bride a five-dollar American gold piece (having previously made a private arrangement with the bridegroom that he was to receive value for it in fish).

'Reo's wife's relatives built the newly-married couple a house on Matautu Point, and 'Reo spent thirty-five dollars in giving the bride's local connections a feast. Then the news spread, and cousins and second cousins and various breeds of aunts and half-uncles travelled up to Matautu Point to partake of his hospitality. He did his best, but in a day or so remarked sadly that he could not catch fish fast enough in a poor canoe. If he had a boat he could make fifty dollars a week, he said; and with fifty dollars a week he could entertain his wife's honoured friends continuously and in a befitting manner. The relatives consulted, and, thinking they had "a good thing," subscribed, and bought a boat (on credit) from the German firm, giving a mortgage on a piece of land as security. Then they presented 'Reo with the boat, with many complimentary speeches, and sat down to chuckle at the way they would "make the old fool work," and the "old fool" went straight away to the American Consul and declared himself to be a citizen of the United States and demanded his country's protection, as he feared his wife's relatives wanted to jew him out of the boat they had given him.

The Consul wrote out something terrifying on a big sheet of paper, and tacked it on to the boat, and warned the surprised relatives that an American man-of-war would protect 'Reo with her guns, and then 'Reo went inside his house and beat his wife with a canoe paddle, and chased her violently out of the place, and threatened her male relatives with a large knife and fearful language.

Then he took the boat round the other side of the island and sold it for two hundred dollars to a trader, and came back to Apia to Denison and asked for a passage to Tutuila, and the German firm entered into and took possession of the mortgaged land, whilst the infuriated relatives tore up and down the beach demanding 'Reo's blood in a loud voice. 'Reo, with his two hundred dollars in his trousers' pocket, sat on the schooner's rail and looked at them stolidly and without ill-feeling.

Denison landed the ancient at Leone Bay on Tutuila, for he had taken kindly to the old scoundrel, who had many virtues, and could give points to any one, white or brown, in the noble art of deep-sea fishing. This latter qualification endeared him greatly to young Tom, who, when he was not employed in keeping the captain sober, or bringing him round after an attack of "D.T.'s," spent all his spare time in fishing, either at sea or in port.

'Reo settled at Leone, and made a good deal of money buying copra from the natives. The natives got to like him—he was such a conscientious old fellow. When he hung the baskets of copra on the iron hook of the steelyard, which was marked to weigh up to 150 lbs., he would call their attention to the marks as he moved the heavy "pea" along the yard. Then, one day, some interfering Tongan visitor examined the pea and declared that it had been taken from a steelyard designed to weigh up to 400 lbs. 'Reo was so hurt at the insinuation that he immediately took the whole apparatus out beyond the reef in his boat and indignantly sunk it in fifty fathoms of water. Then he returned to his house, and he and his wife (he had married again) bade a sorrowful farewell to his friends, and said his heart was broken by the slanders of a vile Tongan pig from a mission school. He would, he said, go back to Apia, where he was respected by all who knew him. Then he began to pack up. Some of the natives sided with the Tongan, some with 'Reo, and in a few minutes a free fight took place on the village green, and 'Reo stood in his doorway and watched it from his narrow, pig-like eyes; then, being of a magnanimous nature, he walked over and asked three stout youths, who had beaten the Tongan into a state of unconsciousness, and were jumping on his body, not to hurt him too much.

About midnight 'Reo's house was seen to be in flames, and the owner, uttering wild, weird screams of "*Fia ola! Fia ola!*" ("Mercy! Mercy!") fled down the beach to his boat, followed by his wife, a large, fat woman, named appropriately enough Taumafa (Abundance). They dashed into the water, clambered into the boat, and began pulling seaward for their lives. The villagers, thinking they had both gone mad, gazed at them in astonishment, and then went back and helped themselves to the few goods saved from the burning house.

As soon as 'Reo and the good wife were out of sight of the village they put about, ran the boat into a little bay further down the coast, planted a bag containing seven hundred dollars, with the best of the trade goods (saved *before* the fire was discovered), and then set sail for Apia to "get justice from the Consul."

The Consul said it was a shocking outrage, the captain of U.S.S. Adirondack concurred, and so the cruiser, with the injured, stolid-faced 'Reo on board, steamed off to Leone Bay and gave the astounded natives twelve

hours to make up their minds as to which they would do—pay 'Reo one thousand dollars in cash or have their town burnt. They paid six hundred, all they could raise, and then, in a dazed sort of way, sat down to meditate as they saw the *Adirondack* steam off again.

'Reo gave his wife a small share of the plunder and sent her home to her parents. When Tom Denison next saw him he was keeping a boarding house at Levuka, in Fiji. He told Denison he was welcome to free board and lodging for a year. 'Reo had his good points, as I have said.

THE BLACK BREAM OF AUSTRALIA

Next to the lordly and brilliant-hued schnapper, the big black bream of the deep harbour waters of the east coast of Australia is the finest fish of the bream species that have ever been caught. Thirty years ago, in the hundreds of bays which indent the shores of Sydney harbour, and along the Parramatta and Lane Cove Rivers, they were very plentiful and of great size; now, one over 3 lbs. is seldom caught, for the greedy and dirty Italian and Greek fishermen who infest the harbour with their fine-meshed nets have practically exterminated them. In other harbours of New South Wales, however—notably Jervis and Twofold Bays—these handsome fish are still plentiful, and there I have caught them winter and summer, during the day under a hot and blazing sun, and on dark, calm nights.

In shape the black bream is exactly as his brighter-hued brother, but his scales are of a dark colour, like partially tarnished silver; he is broader and heavier about the head and shoulders, and he swims in a more leisurely, though equally cautious, manner, always bringing-to the instant anything unusual attracts his attention. Then, with gently undulating tail and steady eye, he regards the object before him, or watches a shadow above with the keenest scrutiny. If it is a small, dead fish, or other food which is sinking, say ten yards in front, he will gradually come up closer and closer, till he satisfies himself that there is no line attached—then he makes a lightning-like dart, and vanishes in an instant with the morsel between his strong, thick jaws. If, however, he sees the most tempting bait—a young yellow-tail, a piece of white and red octopus tentacle, or a small, silvery mullet—and detects even a fine silk line attached to the cleverly hidden hook, he makes a stern-board for a foot or two, still eyeing the descending bait; then, with languid contempt, he slowly turns away, and swims off elsewhere.

In my boyhood's days black-bream fishing was a never-ending source of delight to my brothers and myself. We lived at Mosman's Bay, one of the deepest and most picturesque of the many beautiful inlets of Sydney Harbour. The place is now a populous marine suburb with terraces of shoddy, jerry-built atrocities crowding closely around many beautiful houses with spacious grounds surrounded by handsome trees. Threepenny steamers, packed with people, run every half-hour from Sydney, and the once beautiful dell at the head of the bay, into which a crystal stream of water ran, is as squalid and detestable as a Twickenham lane in summer, when the path is strewn with bits of greasy newspaper which have held fried fish.

But in the days of which I speak, Mosman's Bay was truly a lovely spot, dear to the soul of the true fisherman. Our house—a great quadrangular, one-storied stone building, with a courtyard in the centre—was the only one within a radius of three miles. It had been built by convict hands for a wealthy man, and had cost, with its grounds and magnificent carriage drives, vineyards, and gardens, many thousand pounds. Then the owner died, bankrupt, and for years it remained untenanted, the recrudescing bush slowly enveloping its once highly cultivated lands, and the deadly black snake, iguana, and 'possum harbouring among the deserted outbuildings. But to us boys (when our father rented the place, and the family settled down in it for a two years' sojourn) the lonely house was a palace of beautiful imagination—and solid, delightful fact, when we began to explore the surrounding bush, the deep, clear, undisturbed waters of the bay, and a shallow lagoon, dry at low water, at its head.

Across this lagoon, at the end near the deep water, a causeway of stone had been built fifty-five years before (in 1820) as a means of communication by road with Sydney. In the centre an opening had been left, about twenty feet wide, and across this a wooden bridge had been erected. It had decayed and vanished long, long years before we first saw the place; but the trunk of a great ironbark tree now served equally as well, and here, seated upon it as the tide began to flow in and inundate the quarter-mile of dry sand beyond, we would watch the swarms of fish passing in with the sweeping current.

First with the tide would come perhaps a school of small blue and silver gar-fish, their scarlet-tipped upper mandibles showing clear of the water; then a thick, compact battalion of short, dumpy grey mullet, eager to get up to the head of the lagoon to the fresh water which all of their kind love; then communities of half a dozen of grey and black-striped "black fish" would dart through to feed upon the green weed which grew on the inner side of the stone causeway. Then a hideous, evil-eyed "stingaree," with slowly-waving outspread flappers, and long, whip-like tail, follows, intent upon the cockles and soft-shell clams which he can so easily discover in the sand when he throws it upwards and outwards by the fan-like action of his thin, leathery sides. Again more mullet—big fellows these—with yellow, prehensile mouths, which protrude and withdraw as they swim, and are fitted with a straining apparatus of bristles, like those on the mandibles of a musk duck. They feed only on minute organisms, and will not look at a bait, except it be the tiny worm which lives in the long celluloid tubes of the coral growing upon *congewei*. And then you must have a line as fine as horsehair, and a hook small enough—but strong enough to hold a three-pound fish—to tempt them.

As the tide rose higher, and the incoming water bubbled and hissed as it poured through the narrow entrance underneath the tree-bole on which we sat, red bream, silvery bream, and countless myriads of the small, staring-eyed and delicate fish, locally known as "hardy-heads," would rush in, to return to the deeper waters of the bay as the tide began to fall.

Sometimes—and perhaps "Red Spinner" of the *Field* may have seen the same thing in his piscatorial wanderings in the Antipodes—huge gar-fish of three or four feet in length, with needle-toothed, narrow jaws,

and with bright, silvery, sinuous bodies, as thick as a man's arm, would swim languidly in, seeking for the young mullet and gar-fish which had preceded them into the shallow waters beyond. These could be caught by the hand by suddenly gripping them just abaft of the head. A Moruya River black boy, named "Cass" (*i.e.*, Casanova), who had been brought up with white people almost from infancy, was a past-master in this sort of work. Lying lengthwise upon the tree which bridged the opening, he would watch the giant gars passing in, swimming on the surface. Then his right arm would dart down, and in an instant a quivering, twisting, and gleaming "Long Tom" (as we called them) would be held aloft for a moment and then thrown into a flour-sack held open in readiness to receive it.

Surely this was "sport" in the full sense of the word; for although "Long Tom" is as greedy as a pike, and can be very easily caught by a floating bait when he is hungry, it is not every one who can whip him out of the water in this manner.

There were at least four varieties of mullet which frequented the bay, and in the summer we frequently caught numbers of all four in the lagoon by running a net across the narrow opening, and when the tide ran out we could discern their shining bodies hiding under the black-leaved sea-grass which grew in some depressions and was covered, even at low tide, by a few inches of water. Two of the four I have described; and now single specimens of the third dart in—slenderly-bodied, handsome fish about a foot long. They are one of the few varieties of mullet which will take a hook, and rare sport they give, as the moment they feel the line they leap to and fro on the surface, in a series of jumps and somersaults, and very often succeed in escaping, as their jaws are very soft and thin.

By the time it is slack water there is a depth of six feet covering the sandy bottom of the lagoon, the rush and bubble under the tree-bole has ceased, and every stone, weed, and shell is revealed. Now is the time to look on the deep-water side of the causeway for the big black bream.

There they are—thirty, fifty—perhaps a hundred of them, swimming gently to and fro outside the entrance, longing, yet afraid to enter. As you stand up, and your shadow falls upon their line of vision, they "go about" and turn head on to watch, sometimes remaining in the same position, with gently moving fins and tails, for five minutes; sometimes sinking down to the blue depths beyond, their outlines looming grey and indistinct as they descend, to reappear again in a few minutes, almost on the surface, waiting for the dead mullet or gar-fish which you may perhaps throw to them.

The old ex-Tasmanian convict who was employed to attend to the boat in which we boys went across to Sydney three days a week, weather permitting, to attend school, had told us that we "couldn't hook e'er a one o' thim black bream; the divils is that cunning, masters, that you can't do it. So don't thry it. 'Tis on'y a-waistin' time."

But we knew better; we were born in the colony—in a seaport town on the northern coast—and the aborigines of the Hastings River tribe had taught us many valuable secrets, one of which was how to catch black bream in the broad light of day as the tide flowed over a long stretch of sand, bare at low water, at the mouth of a certain "blind" creek a few miles above the noisy, surf-swept bar. But here, in Mosman's Bay, in Sydney, we had not the cunningly devised gear of our black friends—the principal article of which was the large uni-valve *aliothis* shell—to help us, so we set to work and devised a plan of our own, which answered splendidly, and gave us glorious sport.

When the tide was out and the sands were dry, carrying a basket containing half a dozen strong lines with short-shanked, thick hooks, and two or three dozen young gar-fish, mullet, or tentacles of the octopus, we would set to work. Baiting each hook so carefully that no part of it was left uncovered, we dug a hole in the sand, in which it was then partly buried; then we scooped out with our hands a narrow trench about six inches deep and thirty or forty yards in length, into which the line was laid, covered up roughly, and the end taken to the shore. After we had accomplished laying our lines, radiating right and left, in this manner we covered each tempting bait with an ordinary crockery flower-pot, weighted on the top with a stone to keep it in its place, and then a thin tripping-line was passed through the round hole, and secured to a wooden cross-piece underneath. These tripping-lines were then brought ashore, and our preparations were complete.

"But why," one may ask, "all this elaborate detail, this burying of lines, and, most absurd of all, the covering up of the baited hook with a flowerpot?"

Simply this. As the tide flows in over the sand there come with it, first of all, myriads of small garfish, mullet, and lively red bream, who, if the bait were left exposed, would at once gather round and begin to nibble and tug at it. Then perhaps a swiftly swimming "Long Tom," hungry and defiant, may dart upon it with his terrible toothed jaws, or the great goggle-eyed, floundering sting-ray, as he flaps along his way, might suck it into his toothless but bony and greedy mouth; and then hundreds and hundreds of small silvery bream would bite, tug, and drag out, and finally reveal the line attached, and then the scheme has come to naught, for once the cute and lordly black bream sees a line he is off, with a contemptuous eye and a lazy, proud sweep of tail.

When the tide was near the full flood we would take the ends of our fishing- and tripping-lines in our hands and seat ourselves upon the high sandstone boulders which fringed the sides of the bay, and from whence we could command a clear view of the water below. Then, slowly and carefully, we tripped the flower-pots covering the baits, and hauled them in over the smooth sandy bottom, and, with the baited lines gripped tight in the four fingers of our right hands, we watched and waited.

Generally, in such calm, transparent water, we could, to our added delight, see the big bream come swimming along, moving haughtily through the crowds of small fry—yellow-tail, ground mullet, and trumpeters. Presently, as one of them caught sight of a small shining silvery mullet (or a luscious-looking octopus tentacle) lying on the sand, the languid grace of his course would cease, the broad, many-masted dorsal fin become erect, and he would come to a dead stop, his bright, eager eye bent on the prize before him. Was it a delusion and a snare? No! How could it be? No treacherous line was there—only the beautiful shimmering scales of a delicious silvery-sided young mullet, lying dead, with a thin coating of current-drifted sand upon it. He darts forward, and in another instant the hook is struck deep into the tough grizzle of his white throat; the line is as taut as a steel wire, and he is straining every ounce of his fighting six or eight

pounds' weight to head seawards into deep water.

Slowly and steadily with him, else his many brothers will take alarm, and the rest of the carefully laid baits will be left to become the prey of small "flatheads," or greedy, blue-legged spidery crabs. Once his head is turned, providing he is well hooked, he is safe, and although it may take you ten minutes ere you haul him into such shallow water that he cannot swim upright, and he falls over upon his broad, noble side, and slides out upon the sand, it is a ten minutes of joy unalloyed to the youthful fisherman who takes no heed of two other lines as taut as his own, and only prays softly to himself that his may be the biggest fish of the three.

Generally, we managed to get a fish upon every one of the ten or twelve lines we set in this manner, and as we always used short, stout-shanked hooks of the best make, we rarely lost one. On one occasion, however, a ten-foot sawfish seized one of our baits, and then another and another, and in five minutes the brute had entangled himself amongst the rest of the lines so thoroughly that our old convict boatman, who was watching us from his hut, yelled out, as he saw the creature's serrated snout raised high out of the water as it lashed its long, sinuous tail to and fro, to "play him" till he "druv an iron into it." He thought it was a whale of some sort, and, jumping into a dinghy, he pulled out towards it, just in time to see our stout lines part one after another, and the "sawfish" sail off none the worse for a few miserable hooks in his jaws and a hundred fathoms of stout fishing lines encircling his body.

This old Bill Duggan—he had "done" twenty-one years in that abode of horror, Port Arthur in Tasmania, for a variegated assortment of crimes—always took a deep interest in our black-bream fishing, and freely gave us a shilling for each one we gave him.

He told us that by taking them to Sydney he could sell them for two shillings each, and that he would send the money to a lone, widowed sister who lived in Bridgnorth, England. Our mother deeply sympathised with the aged William (our father said he was a lying old ruffian), and always let him take the boat and pull over to Sydney to sell the fish. He generally came back drunk after twenty-four hours' absence, and said the sun had affected him. But Nemesis came at last.

One day some of the officers of H.M.S. *Challenger*, with some Sydney friends, came to spend a Saturday and Sunday with us. It rained hard on the Saturday night, and the stream which fell into the head of the bay became a roaring torrent, sending a broad line of yellow, muddy foam through the narrow opening of the causeway, which I have before mentioned, into the harbour.

Sadly disappointed that we could not give our guests the sport which we had promised them, we sat upon the causeway and gazed blankly upon the yellowed waters of the bay with bitterness in our hearts. Suddenly "Cass," the Moruya River black boy, who was standing beside us, turned to us with a smile illumining his sooty face.

"What for you coola (angry)? Now the time to catch big pfeller brack bream. Water plenty pfeller muddy. Brack bream baal (is not) afraid of line now."

I, being the youngest, was sent off, with furious brotherly threats and yells, to our guests, to tell them to come down at once with their fishing tackle. I tore up the path and reached the house. The first-lieutenant, commodore's secretary, and two ladies at once rose to the occasion, seized their beautiful rods (at which my brothers and myself were undecided whether to laugh in contempt or to profoundly admire) and followed me down to the causeway.

Before we reached there Billy Duggan and my brothers had already landed half a dozen splendid fish, one of which, of over ten pounds, was held up to us for inspection as a curiosity, inasmuch as a deep semicircular piece had been bitten out of its back (just above the tail) by a shark or some other predatory fish. The wound had healed over perfectly, although its inner edge was within a quarter of an inch of the backbone.

With a brief glance at the fish already taken, the two officers and the ladies had their rods ready, and made a cast into the surging, yellow waters, with disastrous results, for in less than three minutes every one of them had hooked a fish—and lost it.

"Ye're no fishing for finnickin' graylin', or such like pretty-pretty av of the ould counthry," said the old convict patronisingly, as his toothless mouth expanded into a grin. "These blue-nosed devils would break the heart and soul av the best greenheart as was iver grown. Lay down thim sthicks an' take wan of these," and he pointed to some thick lines, ready coiled and baited with pieces of raw beef. "Just have thim out into the wather, and hold on like grim death—that's all. Sure the boys here have taught me a mighty lot I niver larned before."

Our visitors "hived" out the already baited lines, and caught a dozen or more of splendid fish, varying from 6 lbs. to 10 lbs. in weight, and then, as a drenching downpour of rain blotted out everything around us, we went home, leaving our take with Billy, with the exception of two or three of the largest, which we brought home with us for supper. He whispered to my brothers and myself that he would give us "ten bob" for the lot; and as the old villain's money was extremely useful to us, and our parents knew nothing about our dealings with the ancient reprobate, we cheerfully agreed to the "ten bob" suggestion.

But, as I have said, Nemesis was near to William Duggan, Esq., over this matter of the black bream, for on the following Tuesday Lieut. H———happened across the leading fishmonger's shop in Hunter Street, where there were displayed several splendid black bream. One of these, he noticed, had a large piece bitten out of the back, and he at once recognised it. He stepped inside and asked the black-moustached Grecian gentleman who attended to the counter the price of the fish, and where they were caught.

"Nine shillings each, sir. They are a very scarce fish, and we get them only from one man, an old fellow who makes his living by catching them in Mosman's Bay. We give him five shillings each for every fish over 6 lbs., and seven-and-sixpence for every one over 10 lbs. No one else but this old fellow can catch black bream of this size. He knows the trick."

H——, thinking he was doing us boys a good turn, wrote a line to our father, telling him in a humorous manner all about this particular wretched back-bitten black bream which he had recognised, and the price he had been asked for it. Then my father, having no sense of humour, gave us, one and all, a sound thrashing for taking money from old Duggan, who thereafter sold our black bream to a hawker man who travelled around

in a spring cart, and gave him three shillings each, out of which we got two, and spent at a ship chandler's in buying fresh tackle.

For 'twas not the "filthy lucre" we wanted, only the sport.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COLONIAL MORTUARY BARD; "REO," THE FISHERMAN; AND THE BLACK BREAM OF AUSTRALIA ***

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