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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK "FIVE-HEAD" CREEK; AND FISH DRUGGING IN THE
PACIFIC ***

"FIVE-HEAD" CREEK; and FISH DRUGGING IN THE PACIFIC

By Louis Becke

T. Fisher Unwin, 1901

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"FIVE-HEAD" CREEK

I

I had ridden all day through an endless vista of ghostly grey gums and ironbarks, when I came in sight of the long wavering line of vivid green foliage which showed me that I had reached my destination—a roughly-built slab hut with a roof of corrugated iron. This place was to be my home for six months, and stood on the bank of Five-Head Creek, twenty-five miles from the rising city of Townsville in North Queensland.

Riding up to the building, I got off my wearied, sweating horse, and, removing the saddle and my blanket and other impediments, led him to the creek to drink, and then hobbled and turned him loose to feed on the soft lush grass and reeds growing along the margin of the water. Then I entered the empty house, made a brief examination of it, and wondered how my mate would like living in such an apparently comfortless abode.

I must mention that I had come from Townsville to take charge of Five-Head Creek cattle run, which had suffered so severely from a terrible drought that it had been temporarily abandoned. We were to look after and repair the fencing, many miles' length of which had been destroyed by fire or succumbed to white ants, to search for and collect the remnant of the cattle that had not perished in the drought, and see after the place generally. My mate was to follow me out in a few days with a dray-load of stores.

I lit a fire, boiled a billy of tea, and ate some cold beef and damper. Then, as the sun dipped below a range of low hills to the westward, I filled my pipe, and, walking down to the bank of the creek, surveyed my environs.

"What a God-forsaken-looking country!" I thought as I gazed around me; and, indeed, the prospect was anything but inviting. On both sides of the creek the soil showed evidences of the severity of the past drought. Great gaping fissures—usun cracks we called them—traversed and zig-zagged the hot, parching ground, on which not a blade of grass was to be seen. Here and there, amid the grey-barked ghostly gums, were oases of green—thickets of stunted sandalwood whose evergreen leaves defied alike the torrid summer heat and the black frosts of winter months; but underneath them lay the shrivelled carcasses and whitening bones of hundreds of cattle which had perished of starvation—too weak even to totter down to die, bogged in the banks of the creek. As I sat and smoked a strong feeling of depression took possession of me; I already began to hate the place, and regretted I could not withdraw from my engagement.

Yet in less than a week I began to like it, and when I left it I did so with some regret, for I had made friends with sweet Mother Nature, whose loving-kindness is with us always in wild places, though we may not know it at first, and take no heed of her many calls and silent beckonings to us to come and love, and rest and dream, and be content upon her tender, mighty bosom.

My horse, cropping eagerly at the soft grass and salty pigweed, suddenly raised his head and pricked up his ears. He had heard something and was listening, and looking across to the opposite bank I saw a sight that lifted me out of my sudden fit of depression and then filled me with delight.

Two stately emus were walking along in single file, the male bird leading, holding his head erect, and marching like the drum-major of a regiment of Guards. On the margin of the bank they halted and looked at the horse, which now stood facing them; a minute's scrutiny satisfied both parties that there was nothing to fear from each other, and then the great birds walked down the bank to a broad dry patch of bright yellow sand, which stretched halfway across the bed of the creek. Here the male began to scratch, sending up a shower of coarse sand, and quickly swallowing such large pebbles as were revealed, whilst the female squatted beside him and watched his labours with an air of indifference. Her digestive apparatus was, I suppose, in good order, and she did not need three or four pounds' weight of stones in her gizzard, but she did require a sand bath, for presently she too began to scrape and sway from side to side as she worked a deep hole beneath her body, just as a common hen scrapes and sways and ruffles her feathers in the dry dust of the farmyard. In less than five minutes the huge bird was encompassed in a cloud of flying sand, and working her long neck, great thick legs, and outspread toes exactly as an ordinary fowl. Then, having thoroughly covered herself with sand from beak to tail, she rose, shook herself violently, and stalked away up the bank again, where her companion soon followed her, and I lost sight of the pair as they strode through the thick green of the she-oak trees.

As darkness fell I built up a larger fire and spread my blanket beside it to sleep under the open sky instead of in the deserted house, for the night was soft, warm, and windless. Overhead was a firmament of cloudless blue, with here and there a shining star beginning to show; but away to the south-west a dark line of cloud was rising and spreading, and I felt cheered at the sight, for it was a sign of rain. As I watched it steadily increasing the first voices of the night began to call—a 'possum squealed from the branches of a blue gum in the creek, and was answered by another somewhere near; and then the long, long mournful wail of a curlew cried out from the sunbaked plain beyond. Oh, the unutterable sense of loneliness that at times the long-drawn, penetrating cry of the curlew, resounding through the silence of the night amid the solitude of vast Australian plains, causes the solitary bushman or traveller to feel! I well remember on one occasion camping on the banks of the Lower Burdekin River, and having my broken slumbers—for I was ill with fever—disturbed by a brace of curlews, which were uttering their depressing cries within a few hundred yards of me, and how I at last became so wrought up and almost frenzied by the persistency of their doleful notes, that I followed them up with a Winchester rifle, mile after mile, wasting my cartridges and exhausting mind and body in the vain attempt to shoot them in the dark. There is to my knowledge nothing so mournful as the call of the curlew, unless it be the moaning cry of a penguin out upon the ocean, when a sea-fog encompasses the

ship that lies becalmed. There is something so intensely human about it—as if some lost soul were wailing for mercy and forgiveness.

But on this night the cry of the curlew was pleasing to my ear, for as I lay and watched the rising bank of cloud, I heard others calling from the opposite bank of the creek, and then a parrot screamed shrilly—and I knew that rain was certain. I jumped up, carried my blanket, saddle, and gun into the house, and then went out to collect firewood. My horse, as he heard my footsteps, bounded up, hobbled as he was, from the bed of the creek, and neighed to me in the darkness. He too smelt the coming rain, and was speaking to me out of his gladness of heart. I called back to him, and then set to work and soon collected a number of dry logs, which I carried in to the hut and threw down on the hard earthen floor made of pulverised ant heaps, just as the welcome thunder muttered away off in the distance.

I brought a burning brand from the fire, threw it inside, and then called to my horse. Taking off his hobbles, I slipped the bridle over his head, and brought him in under shelter of the verandah, where he stood quietly, with a full stomach and contented mind, watching the coming storm.

Half an hour later the iron roof of the house was singing a sweet, delightful tune to the heavy down-pouring rain, which, till long past midnight, fell in generous volume, the dry, thirsty soil drinking it in with gladness as it closed up the gaping fissures, and gave hope and vigour and promise of life to the parched and perishing vegetation of the wide plains around.

With supreme satisfaction I sat at the open door, and smoked and watched, with my fire blazing merrily away; then, before it was too late, I stripped off, and went out and let the rain wash off the dust and dirt of a day's journey under a fierce, baking sun. How cool, delightful, and invigorating it felt!

I dried myself with a spare shirt, and then lay down on my blanket beside the fire to listen contentedly to the clamour of the rain upon the roof. About two in the morning the downpour ceased, the sky cleared, and a fair half-moon of silvery brightness shone out above the tops of the white gum forest. Fifty yards or so away, in front of the door, a shallow pool had formed in a depression of the hard, sun-baked soil, and as the soft light of the moon fell upon it there came a whirr of wings as a flock of night-roving, spur-winged plover lit upon its margin. I could have shot half a dozen of them from where I sat, but felt that I could not lift gun to shoulder and slaughter when there was no need, and their shrill cries, as they ran to and fro, afforded me an infinite pleasure.

I took off my horse's bridle, put his hobbles on again, rubbed my cheek against his warm, moist nose, and left him. An hour before daylight he stepped quietly inside and stood near the fire—the mosquitoes were annoying him, and he had come in to get the benefit of what little smoke was arising from the burning logs.

At dawn, as I lay half-awake, I heard a sound that made me jump to my gun—the soft quacking of wild duck in the creek. Stealing cautiously down through the fringe of she-oaks, I came to a fine broad pool, in the centre of which was a small sandbank, whereon stood a black duck with a brood of seven half-fledged ducklings around her, dabbling merrily amongst the weed and *débris* of the margin. Of course, no one who *thinks*, unless impelled by sheer hunger, would shoot either an incubating or “just familial” duck, and I laid down my gun with an exclamation of disappointment. But I was soon to be rewarded, for a minute or two later five beautiful black and white Burdekin ducks flashed down through the vista of she-oaks, and settled on the water less than thirty yards away from me. They lit so closely together that my first barrel killed two, and my second dropped one of the others as they rose. I waded in and brought them ashore.*

** The name “Burdekin” has been given to these ducks because they are so common on the river of that name. Their wings are pure white and black.*

I wonder how many people know how to cook and eat wild duck as they should be cooked and eaten—when they are plentiful, and when the man who shoots them is, in his way, a gourmet, and is yet living away from civilisation and restaurants? This is *the* way. Pluck the feathers off the breast and body, then cut the breast part out, sprinkle it with salt, impale it upon a stick—if you have a stick or branch of any kind—and hold it over a fire of glowing wood coals. If you have no skewer, then lay the red, luscious-looking flesh upon the coals themselves, and listen to it singing and fizzing, as if it were impatiently crying out to you to take it up and eat it!

When I returned, the sunrays were piercing through the gum-trees and dissipating a thin mist which hung about the green, winding fringe of she-oaks bordering the creek. From the ground, which now felt soft, warm, and springy to my naked foot, there came that sweet earthy smell that arises when the land has lain for long, long months under a sky of brass, and all green things have struggled hard to live. As I drew near the hut I saw that the flock of spur-winged plover were still standing or running about the margin of the newly-formed pool. They took not the slightest notice of my approach, and I was careful not to alarm them, knowing that as long as the water remained they would continue to haunt the vicinity of the pool, and, besides that, I already had three plump ducks, which would last me at least till the following morning.

After breakfast I set out to make a detailed examination of the creek for a distance of three or four miles towards its source. I was glad to find some very extensive water-holes at intervals of a few hundred yards, then would come a stretch of sand from bank to bank, for owing to the want of rain the water had fallen very low, though it was still flowing by percolation through the sand. Yet, in time of flood, the whole of the flat country was submerged, and some of the large gum-trees growing on the banks held in their forks, thirty-five feet from the ground, great piles of dead wood and tangled debris that had been deposited there in a great flood of two years before.

I was not long in making a very pleasing discovery—all the pools contained fish, some of which were of good size, for the water was so clear that I could see them swimming about, and I remembered now with satisfaction that among the stores coming on in the dray was a bundle of fishing-tackle which I had bought in Townsville. Bird life all along the creek was plentiful; but this was to be expected, as the long drought had naturally driven game of all sort towards the water. I saw two or three small kangaroos, and everywhere along the margin were bandicoot holes, where the little pig-like creatures had been digging for roots.

Two miles from the hut I came across a well-constructed native fish-weir, and near by found the site of a

camp; evidently a party of blacks had been enjoying themselves quite recently, fishing and cattle killing, for under some scrub I found the head and foreleg of a young steer.

As I walked my horse slowly over the sand under the fringing oaks, I made the unpleasant discovery that snakes were very plentiful—not only the harmless carpet snake, but the deadly brown and black-necked tiger variety; though against this were a corresponding number of iguanas, both of the tree-climbing and water-haunting species. The latter, to which I shall again allude, is a particularly shuddersome reptile. I had never before seen these repulsive creatures, and, indeed, had never heard of them.

I returned to the hut at noon, and to my surprise found a party of thirty or more blacks camped under some Leichhardt trees. They seemed a fairly healthy lot of savages, and were not alarmed when they saw I was carrying a gun. I rode quietly up to them, and shook hands with two or three of the bucks, who spoke a little English. They were, they told me, from the Ravenswood district, which they had left some weeks ago, and were now travelling towards the Burdekin, hunting as they went.

Some of them came to the hut with me, and I saw at once that they had not taken anything of mine, though among other articles I had left on a wooden seat outside were several plugs of tobacco. I gave them a plug to divide, and then asked the most voluble of them how many cattle they had speared.

“Baal blackfellow spear him cattle,” he answered.* “What about that young fellow bullock you been eat longa creek?” I inquired.

** Lit., “We blacks did not spear any cattle.”*

They assured me that they had not speared the animal, which they had found lying at the bottom of a deep gully with a broken leg. Then knowing it could not live, they had killed and eaten it. I was pleased to hear this, and have no doubt the poor creatures told the truth. They remained with myself and mate for a month, and proved of great assistance to us in fencing and other work, and I learnt much valuable bush-craft from these wandering savages, especially of their methods of hunting and fishing. I shall now give the reader an account of some of the happy days my mate and myself spent in this lonely spot.

II

A few days later my mate arrived with the dray, which we at once unloaded, and then turned the horses out to feed and have a spell before working them again. Every night since I had arrived a thunderstorm had occurred, much to my delight, and already the once cracked and baking flats were beginning to put on a carpet of grass; and indeed, in three weeks it was eighteen inches high, and made a glorious sight, the few remaining cattle eating it so hungrily that when night fell the creatures were scarcely able to move, so distended were their stomachs.

Having started our aboriginal friends to cut down ironbark saplings to repair the fencing, we first of all paid a visit to our nearest neighbour, a settler named Dick Bullen, who lived ten miles away. He received us most hospitably, like all good bushmen, and offered to assist us in looking for lost cattle. He was a splendid type of the native-born Australian bushman, over six feet two in height, and simple and unaffected in his manner. I shall remember this man for one thing. He had two of the finest teams of working bullocks I have ever seen, and handled them in a way that commanded our admiration. Never once did he use his whip for any other purpose than to crack it occasionally, and it did one good to hear his cheery call to the fourteen labouring beasts as they toiled up the steep side of a creek or gully with a heavy load of timber, straining every nerve in their great bodies, while the sweat poured off their coats in streams. He was like one of his own bullocks, patient, cheerful, and strong, and an exclamation of anger seldom passed his lips—an oath never. He took a great pride in the appearance of his teams, and especially of the fact that no one of them showed the marks of a whip.

We spent a pleasant hour with this man, and returned home by a different route, in the hope of getting a “plain” turkey—an altogether different bird from the “scrub” turkey. Hansen (my mate) was an excellent shot, especially with a rifle, and indeed when shooting turkeys preferred to use a 44 Winchester rifle. We managed to get one bird—a cock—but so old and poor that we gave it to the black contingent to eat. Nothing in the shape of food came amiss to these people, and their appetites were astounding. One day Hansen and I were following down a creek which junctioned with the Reid River, when we saw smoke ascending from a dry gully. Riding up we came across a very old and shrivelled gin and a boy and girl of about eight years of age. They were busily engaged in eating emu eggs, and out of thirteen had already devoured eleven, together with four or five hundred of fresh-water cockles! Such a meal would have satisfied half a dozen hungry white men. Their over-loaded stomachs presented a disgusting appearance, and they were scarcely able to articulate.

A week after our arrival the blacks told us that there were indications that the rainy season would come on earlier than usual, and that game, except duck and spur-winged plover, would be very scarce; also that if the creek came down in flood, it would carry away most of the fish. This was bad news for such ardent sportsmen as Hansen and myself, for we were looking forward to plenty of fishing and shooting, not alone for its pleasures, but also because we were charged heavily for anything but the ordinary salt beef, tea, sugar and flour. Sardines and tinned salmon were luxuries we could not afford, but fresh fish and game were better, and, even when salted, were preferable to a continuous diet of beef.

We had among our stores a 250 lb. bag of coarse salt—we had to kill our own meat and salt it down—and I proposed that we should at once set to work whilst the weather was fine and spend a week shooting and fishing. Such game as plain turkeys (the bustard), scrub turkeys, cockatoos, ducks, &c., we could put in brine, whilst the fish could be drysalted and then put in the sun to dry. Hansen quite approved the idea, and we at once set to work. I was to be fisherman, and he the gunner; for, curiously enough, my mate was the most

helpless creatures with a fishing-line or rod that I ever saw. In five minutes he would either have his line hopelessly tangled, his rod broken, or his hook caught in his hand; and yet he never lost his temper.

Taking with me two sturdy black boys as porters, and also bringing my gun and ammunition in case of meeting duck, I set out on foot, Hansen riding off, accompanied by a blackfellow, to a chain of shallow lagoons five miles away.

Within a quarter of a mile from the house was a fine deep water-hole formed by the creek being here confined between high banks. At one end, however, an exposed bar of small, coarse round pebbles ran almost across, and here I decided to begin, instead of from the bank, for not only were snakes difficult to see in the undergrowth, but plants of the dreaded stinging-tree were also growing around and between the magnificent gums and the Leichhardts. These latter trees, named after the ill-fated Dr. Leichhardt, are, I think, the most strikingly handsome of all large trees in the north of Queensland. They love to grow near or even in the water, and their broad, beautiful leaves give a welcome shade.

But before I descended to the bank I had to remain for some minutes to gaze on the beauty of the scene. The water at one end of the pool was of the deepest blue, towards the pebbly bar it gradually shallowed, and for the next eight or ten feet from the margin was as clear as crystal. Close in under the banks the broad leaves of blue flowering water-lilies covered the surface with a carpet of many shades of green and pink; hovering above the lily leaves were hundreds of small white butterflies, with here and there a black and yellow-banded dragon-fly—“horse-stingers” the Australian youth call them. Not a sound broke the silence, except now and then the rippling splash of a fish rising to the surface, or the peculiar *click, click* made by a crayfish burrowing under a stone.

I leant over the bank and looked down, and then gave a start of pleasure, for right beneath me were three fish floating motionless on the surface—fish that, until then, I never knew lived in fresh water. They were in shape, colour, and appearance exactly like the toothed gar so common on the sea coast—a long slender body with back of dark blue, sides of silvery white, and fins and tail of blue tipped with yellow. I was so excited that I was about to shoot them, but remembered that at so short a distance I should have only blown them to pieces, especially as they were directly beneath me. I motioned to the blackboys to come and look; they did so, and I learnt that these fish, when the creek was low, were sometimes plentiful, and would take almost any floating bait, especially if it were alive.

Eager to begin, I told the boys to collect some crayfish for bait, but they said that it would take too long, and small fish were better, and running to some small lily-covered pools about two feet in diameter, and very shallow, they jumped in and stirred up the sand and muddy sediment at the bottom. In a few minutes some scores of very pretty red and silvery-hued minnows were thrown out on the sand. I quickly baited my line, and threw it, with the sinker attached, into the centre of the pool; before it could sink the bait was taken by a fine bream of 2 lbs., which I landed safely, and tossed to the boys. It was the first fresh-water bream I had caught in Queensland, and I felt elated.

Finding that the pool was clear of snags, I bent on three extra hooks, baiting each one with the whole of a tiny fish. Again the baits were seized before they reached the bottom; I hauled in two more bream, and as they came struggling and splashing into the shallow water I saw they were being followed by literally hundreds of the same species, and also by fish much like an English grayling—the pool seemed to be alive! The presence of such large numbers in so circumscribed a space could, however, be easily accounted for by the absence of rain for so many months, the drying up of many minor pools and stretches, and the diminution of the water generally throughout the creek and its tributaries driving the fish to congregate in the deeper and larger pools.

By noon I had caught as many fish as the boys could carry. None, it is true, were very large, 2 1/2 lbs. being the heaviest; but I was pleased to learn that there were places farther down the creek where the blacks frequently caught some very large cat-fish; when the water was muddy from heavy rain. These cat-fish, or, as some people call them, “jew-fish,” are the heaviest and best of all the Queensland river fish I have ever tasted, except those which, for want of their true name, I called grayling, and Hansen asserted were trout.

Sending the black boys off with the fish, I cut a rod from a she-oak and quickly rigged a line; for a float I used a small piece of dead wood, and baited with the largest minnow I could find. Then, clambering up the bank, I found a suitable open place to stand at the butt of a Leichhardt, from where I had a good view. I could not, however, see any of the gars, one at least of which I was so anxious to get, but made a cast into the centre—and almost instantly one darted out from under the lily leaves and hooked himself beautifully, but in swinging him out my line fouled a thorny bush, and for a minute I was in despair; there was the shining beauty suspended over the water, and almost making a circle of his body in his struggle to escape. At last, however, I cleared my line, and swung my prize high up on the bank. Determined to get a better rod, and return after dinner, I picked up gun and fish and followed the boys.

By sunset I had a catch of fish that fairly astonished Hansen when he returned at dusk with but half a dozen black duck, two or three teal, and two turkeys. All that evening we were employed in cleaning and salting the fish and birds, except some for immediate use.

We had many such days. Fish were to be had all throughout the course of the creek, and had we possessed a net like those the blacks sometimes used, we could have taken a hogsheadful in half an hour.

Then, as the rainy season began, I ceased fishing and took to the gun, for now three or four kinds of duck made their appearance, and one moonlight night an immense number alighted in the creek just below the hut, and kept up an incessant gabble and quacking till sunrise.

In less than ten days we had enough salted game and dried and smoked fish to last us three months, even had we eaten nothing else. Our black friends—with the exception of one lad who desired to remain—left us one morning at sunrise, and we saw them no more. I am afraid they were deeply hurt by our poisoning half a dozen of their mangy dogs, which were, with the rest of the pack, a continual source of annoyance to us by their expert thieving.

One dull, rainy day, as we sat indoors mending our clothes, and yarning and smoking, we heard the scream of parrots, and, going to the door, saw some twenty or thirty of them, large, fine, green and scarlet plumaged

birds, hanging on to and crawling in and out among the branches of some low trees growing between the stockyard and the creek. These trees were a species of wattle, and were just opening out their yellow, sweet-smelling, downy flowers, which the beautiful birds were devouring eagerly. We did not disturb them, and they did not appear to be alarmed when we walked up to within a few yards of the trees, merely screaming defiance, and flying up to the higher branches, or to other trees near by. These birds the local settlers called "king-parrots"; they were larger than those of the same species in New South Wales, and later in the season we shot a few of them for soup. This particular flock visited us for many days in succession, forming a pretty picture as they hung on the branches, chattering loudly the while, and flashing their gaily-coloured plumage in the bright sunshine. Like the spur-winged plover, they were very inquisitive birds; if one of their number was shot, and fell wounded, the rest of the flock would fly round and round the poor creature, watching its movements and listening to its cries, not out of pity, but of sheer curiosity, and each could be shot in succession, or sometimes knocked down with a stick. I was told by a stockman on Fanning Downs station that on several occasions when he had wounded birds of this variety of the parrot tribe, their companions descended upon them with fury, tore out their feathers, and bit and lacerated them savagely.

Now and again a few wandering emus would cross the grey gum plains around us, and then, as they caught sight of our figures, shamble quickly off again. In former years they had been plentiful in the district, and provided good food for the aborigines when the latter organised their big hunting parties. But as the country was taken up as cattle runs, hundreds of the great birds were wantonly shot by white men for the mere pleasure of killing, and all the months we lived in the district we did not see more than twenty.

I have before spoken of the number of snakes that were everywhere to be seen in the vicinity of the water, particularly about pools with a reedy margin. Scarcely a week passed without our killing three or four, and we were always careful in bathing to do so in very shallow water, where there was a clear sandy bottom. There were three kinds of water-snakes, one of which was of a dull blue colour, and these the blacks said were "bad fellow," *i.e.*, venomous. They seldom grew over two feet and a half in length, and on a bright day one might see several of these reptiles swimming across from one bank to the other. Of the common brown snake—the kind we most dreaded—and the black-necked tiger snake, we killed numbers with our guns and with sticks, and one day, when crossing some red ironstone ridges on the Ravenswood road, we despatched two death-adders which were lying asleep on the bare, hot road. They were of a dull reddish brown, the same hue as the ground in the ironstone country, just as they are a yellowish brown in a sandstone region.

One great pest to us when fishing were the number of mudturtles, greedy little creatures which persistently swallowed our hooks, which could only be recovered by placing one's foot on their backs, drawing out their long snaky necks to the utmost tension, and cutting off their heads; the other pests were the hideous flabby water iguanas (I do not know their proper name), which, although they never interfered with our lines, sickened us even to look at them. They were always to be seen lying on a log or snag in the water. As you approached they either crawled down like an octopus, or dropped, in a boneless, inert mass, without a splash. Their slimy, scaleless skins were a muddy yellow, and in general they resembled an eel with legs. Even the blacks looked on them with disgust, though they are particularly fond of the ordinary iguana.

The time passed somewhat wearily to us when heavy rains and flooded country kept us indoors for days together. Then one night after the weather had begun to get cooler and clearer, we heard, far, far overhead, the *honk, honk* of the wild geese, flying southwards to distant lagoons, and Hansen reminded me that in another week our term of service came to an end.

"What made you think of it?" I asked.

"The cry of the wild geese going South."

For we, too, longed for the South again.

FISH DRUGGING IN THE PACIFIC

In an American magazine of a few months ago mention was made of the "discovery" of a method of capturing fish by impregnating the waters of slowly running rivers or small lakes with a chemical which would produce stupefaction, and cause the fish to rise helpless to the surface. The American discoverer no doubt thought he really had "discovered," though I am sure many thousands of people in the civilised world have heard of, and some few hundreds very often seen, fish captured in a somewhat similar manner, the which is, I believe, practised not only in India, Africa and South America, but in the islands of the North and South Pacific, and I have no doubt but that it was known thousands of years ago—perhaps even "when the world was young."

Nearly all the Malayo-Polynesian people inhabiting the high, mountainous islands of the South Pacific and North Pacific Oceans can, and do, catch fish in the "novel" manner before mentioned, *i.e.*, by producing stupefaction, though no chemicals are used, while even the Australian aborigines—almost as low a type of savage as the Fuegians—use a still simpler method, which I will at once briefly describe as I saw it practised by a mob of myall (wild) blacks camped on the Kirk River, a tributary of the great Burdekin River in North Queensland.

At a spot where the stream was about a hundred feet wide, and the water very shallow—not over six inches in depth—a rude but efficient dam was expeditiously constructed by thrusting branches of she-oak and *ti*-tree into the sandy bottom, and then making it partially waterproof by quickly filling the interstices with earthen sods, *ti*-tree bark, reeds, leaves, and the other *débris* found on the banks. In the centre a small opening was left, so as to relieve the pressure when the water began to rise. Some few hundred yards further up were a chain of water-holes, some of which were deep, and in all of which, as I knew by experience, were plenty of fish—bream, perch, and a species of grayling. As soon as the dam was complete, the whole mob, except some

"gins" and children, who were stationed to watch the opening before mentioned, sprang into the water, carrying with them great quantities of a greasy greyish blue kind of clay, which rapidly dissolved and charged the clear water with its impurities. Then, too, at the same time thirty or forty of their number (over a hundred) began loosening and tearing away portions of the overhanging bank, and toppling them over into the stream; this they accomplished very dexterously by means of heavy, pointed sticks. The work was carried out with an astounding clamour, those natives in the water diving to the bottom and breaking up the fallen earth still further till each pool became of the colour and something of the consistency of green pea-soup. Hundreds of fish soon rose gasping to the surface, and these were at once seized and thrown out upon the banks, where a number of young picaninnies darted upon them to save them being devoured by a swarm of mongrel dogs, which lent an added interest to the proceedings by their incessant yelping and snapping. As the slowly running current carried the suffocating and helpless fish down-stream the hideous noise increased, for the shallow stretch in front of the dam was soon covered with them—bream, and the so-called "grayling," perch, eels, and some very large cat-fish. The latter, which I have mentioned on a previous page, is one of the most peculiar-looking but undoubtedly the best flavoured of all the Queensland fresh-water fishes; it is scaleless, tail-less, blue-grey in colour, and has a long dorsal spike, like the salt-water "leather-jacket." (A scratch from this spike is always dangerous, as it produces intense pain, and often causes blood-poisoning.) Altogether over a thousand fish must have been taken, and I gazed at the destruction with a feeling of anger, for these pools had afforded my mining mates and myself excellent sport, and a very welcome change of diet from the eternal beef and damper. But, a few days later, after our black friends had wandered off to other pastures, I was delighted to find that there were still plenty of fish in the pools.

Early in the "seventies" I was shipwrecked with the once notorious Captain "Bully" Hayes, on Kusaie (Strong's Island), the eastern outlier of the Caroline Islands on the North Pacific, and lived there for twelve happy months, and here I saw for the first time the method of fish stupefaction employed by the interesting and kindly-natured people of this beautiful spot.

I had previously seen, in Eastern Polynesia, the natives drugging fish by using the pounded nuts of the *futu* tree (*Barringtonia speciosa*), and one day as I was walking with a native friend along the beach near the village in which I lived, I picked up a *futu* nut lying on the sand, and remarked that in the islands to the far south the people used it to drug fish.

Kuis laughed. "*Futu* is good, but we of Kusaie do not use it—we have *oap* which is stronger and better. Come, I will show you some *oap* growing, and to-morrow you shall see how good it is."

Turning off to our right, we passed through a grove of screw-pines, and then came to the foot of the high mountain range traversing the island, where vine and creeper and dense jungle undergrowth struggled for light and sunshine under the dark shade of giant trees, whose thick leafy branches, a hundred feet above, were rustling to the wind. Here, growing in the rich, red soil, was a cluster of *oap*—a thin-stemmed, dark-green-leaved plant about three feet in height. Kuis pulled one by the roots, and twisted it round and round his left hand; a thick, white and sticky juice exuded from the bark.

"It 'sickens' the fish very quickly," he said, "quicker than the *futu* nut. If much of it be bruised and thrown into the water, it kills the largest fish very soon, and even turtles will 'sicken.' It is very strong."

I asked him how the people of Kusaie first became acquainted with the properties of the plant. He shook his head.

"I do not know. God made it to grow here in Kusaie in the days that were dark" (heathenism) "and when we were a young people. A wise man from Germany was here ten years ago, and he told us that the people of Ponapé, far to the west, use the *oap* even as we use it, but that in Ponapé the plant grows larger and is more juicy than it is here." *

** The "wise man from Germany," I ascertained a year or two afterwards, was the well-known J. S. Kubary, a gentleman who, although engaged in trading pursuits, yet enriched science by his writings on his discoveries in Micronesia.*

Early on the following morning, when the tide was falling, and the jagged pinnacles of coral rock began to show on the barrier reef opposite the village, the entire population—about sixty all told—were awaiting Kuis and myself outside his house. The men carried small, unbarbed fish-spears, the women and children baskets and bundles of *oap*.

From the village to the reef was a distance of two miles, which we soon covered by smart paddling in a dozen or more canoes; for had we delayed we should, through the falling tide, have been obliged to leave our stranded crafts on the sand, half-way, and walk the remainder.

I need not here attempt to describe the wondrous beauties of a South Sea coral reef at low tide—they have been fully and ably written about by many distinguished travellers—but the barrier reef of Strong's Island is so different in its formation from those of most other islands in the Pacific, that I must, as relative illustration to this account of the fishing by *oap* mention its peculiarity.

Instead of the small clefts, chasms, and pools which so frequently occur on the barrier reefs of the mountainous islands of Polynesia and Melanesia, and which at low tide are untenanted except by the smallest varieties of rock-fish, here were a series of deep, almost circular, miniature lakes, set in a solid wall of coral rock with an overlapping edge, which made the depth appear greater than it was, especially when one stood on the edge and looked down to the bottom, four to six fathoms below.

In all of these deep pools were great numbers of fish of many varieties, size, and colour; some swimming to and fro or resting upon the sandy bottom, others moving upwards and then downwards in the clear water with lazy sweep of tail and fin. One variety of the leather-jacket tribe was very plentiful, and their great size was excelled only by their remarkable ugliness; their ground colour was a sombre black, traversed by three broad bands of dull yellow. Some of the largest of these fish weighed quite up to 20 lbs., and were valued by the natives for their delicacy of flavour. They would always take a hook, but the Strong's Islanders seldom attempted to capture them in this manner, for their enormous, hard, sharp, and human-like teeth played

havoc with an ordinary fish-hook, which, if smaller than a salmon-hook, they would snap in pieces, and as their mouths are very small (in fact the leather-jacket's mouth is ridiculous when compared to its bulk), larger and stronger hooks could not be used.

Another and smaller variety were of a brilliant light blue, with vivid scarlet-tipped fins and tail, a perfectly defined circle of the same colour round the eyes, and protruding teeth of a dull red. These we especially detested for their villainous habit of calmly swimming up to a pendant line, and nipping it in twain, apparently out of sheer humour. Well have the Samoans named the leather-jacket *Isu'umu Moana*—the sea-rat.

In one or two of the deeper pools were red, bream-shaped fish that I had in vain tried to catch with a hook, using every possible kind of bait; but the natives assured me that I was only wasting my time, as they fed only upon a long thread-like worm, which lived in the coral, and that a spear or the *oap* was the only way of capturing them. So far I had never actually handled one, but on this occasion we secured some dozens. Here and there we caught sight of a young hawk-bill turtle darting out of sight under the ledge of the overhanging walls of coral, putting to flight thousands of small fish of a score of shapes and colours.

We waited until the tide had fallen still lower and until the whole surface of the great sweeping curve of reef stood out, bare and steaming, under the bright tropic sun. Westward lay the ocean, blue and smooth as a mill pond, with only a gentle, heaving swell laving the outer wall of the coral barrier. Here and there upon its surface communities of snowy white terns hovered and fluttered, feeding upon small fish, or examining floating weed for tiny red and black crabs no bigger than a pea. Eastward and across the now shallowed water of the lagoon was our village of Leassé, the russet-hued, saddle-backed houses of thatch peeping out from the coco-palms and breadfruit-trees; beyond, the broken, rugged outline of the towering mountain range, garmented from base to summit with God's mantle of living green; overhead a sky of wondrous, unspiced blue.

We were all sitting on the rocks, on the margin of the best and largest pool, smoking and chatting, when at a sign from Kuisi, who was the head man (or local chief) of the village, the women took their bundles of *oap* and laying the plants upon smooth portions of the reef began to pound them with round, heavy stones, brought from the village for the purpose. As each bundle was crushed and the sticky white juice exuded, it was rolled into a ball, used like a sponge to wipe up and absorb all the liquid that had escaped, and then handed to the men and boys, who leapt into the pool, and dived to the bottom, thrusting the balls of *oap* underneath every lower ledge and crevice, and then rising quickly to the surface and clambering out again. In less than five minutes the once crystal water had changed to a pale milky white, thousands upon thousands of tiny fish, about half an inch in length, and of many hues, began to rise to the surface; then others of a larger size, which the women at once scooped up with small nets; then presently, with much splashing and floundering, two or three of the handsome red fish I have described, with a great leather-jacket, came up, and, lying on their sides, flapped helplessly on the surface. Other kinds, of the mullet species, came with them, trying to swim upright, but always falling over on their sides, and yet endeavouring to lift their heads above the water, as if gasping for air. Then more big leather-jackets, some of which shot up from below as if they had been fired from a mortar, and, running head-on to the rocky wall of the pool, allowed themselves to be lifted out without a struggle. It was most exciting and intensely interesting to witness.

Presently up came a half-grown hawkbill turtle, his poor head erect and swaying from side to side; a boy leapt in and, seizing it by its flippers, pushed it up to some women, who quickly carried the creature to a small pool near by, where it was placed to recover from the effects of the *oap* and then be taken ashore to the village turtle-dock to grow and fatten for killing. (The "turtle-dock," I must explain, was a walled-in enclosure—partly natural, partly artificial—situated in a shallow part of the lagoon, wherein the Leassé people confined those turtle that they could not at once eat; sometimes as many as thirty were thus imprisoned and fed daily.)

Out of this one pool—which I think was not more than fifteen yards across—we obtained many hundredweights of fish and three turtle. All fish which were too small to be eaten were thrown into other pools to recover from the effects of the *oap*. The very smallest, however, did not recover, and were left to float on the surface and become the prey of large fish when the incoming tide again covered the reef.

I must here relate an incident that now occurred, and which will serve to illustrate the resourcefulness and surgical knowledge of a race of people who, had they met them, Darwin, Huxley and Frank Buckland would have delighted in and made known to the world. I shall describe it as briefly and as clearly as possible.

I had brought with me a knife—a heavy, broad-backed, keen-edged weapon, which the Chinese carpenter of our wrecked ship had fashioned out for me from a flat twelve-inch file of Sheffield steel, and Kuisi had, later on, made me a wooden sheath for it. In my excitement at seeing a large fish rise to the surface I used it as a spear, and then, the fish secured, had thrown the knife carelessly down. It fell edge upwards in a cleft of the coral rock, and Kinié, the pretty twelve-year-old daughter of Kuisi, treading upon it, cut her left foot to the bone. Her father and myself sprang to her aid, and whilst I was tying the one handkerchief I possessed tightly round her leg below the knee so as to stay the terrible flow of blood, he rapidly skinned a large leather jacket by the simple process of cutting through the skin around the head and shoulders and then dragging it off the body by holding the upper edge between his teeth and then with both hands pulling it downwards to the tail. In less than five minutes the sheet of tough fish-skin was deftly and tightly wrapped round the child's foot, the handkerchief taken off and replaced by a coir fibre fishing-line, wound round and round below and above the knee. The agony this caused the poor child made her faint, but her father knew what he was about when he ordered two of the women to carry her ashore, take off the covering of fish-skin, cover the foot with wood-ashes, and bind it up again. This was done, and when we returned to the village an hour or two later I found the girl seated in her father's house with her injured foot bandaged in a way that would have reflected credit on a M.R.C.S.

After exploiting the large pool we turned our attention to some of those which were wider, but comparatively shallow; and in these, the bottoms of which were sandy, we obtained some hundreds of mullet and gar-fish, which were quickly overpowered by the *oaf* juice. In all I think that we carried back to the village quite five hundredweight of fish, some of which were very large: the weight of three of the large banded leather-jackets I estimated at fifty pounds.

In after years, in other islands of the Pacific, when I saw the fearful and needless havoc created by traders and natives using vile dynamite cartridges and so destroying thousands of young fish by one explosion, I tried hard to get them to use either the *futu* nut or the *oap* plant, both of which under many names are known to the various peoples of Eastern Polynesia.

But the use of dynamite has an attractive element of danger; it is more sudden and destructive in its effect; it makes a noise and churns up and agitates the water; its violent concussion breaks and smashes the submarine coral forest into which it is thrown; and its terrific shock kills and mutilates hundreds of fish, which, through their bladders bursting, sink and are not recovered.

Only a few years ago an old and valued American friend of mine—an ex-ship captain settled in the Gilbert Islands in the North Pacific—became annoyed at what he deemed to be the excessive prices the natives charged for fish. The “excessive price,” I may mention, meant that he was asked a half-dollar for a basket of fish weighing, say, fifty or sixty pounds. A half-a-dollar is equal to an English florin; but no coin was handed over—four sticks of tobacco costing the trader about ten cents, was the equivalent. So my friend decided to show the natives that he could do without them as far as his fish supply went. He bought a box of dynamite, with fuse and caps, from a German trading schooner, and at once set to work, blowing off his right hand within twenty-four hours, through using too short a fuse.

That wretched box of dynamite proved a curse to the island. The natives, despite my friend's accident, bought every cartridge from him, singly or in lots, and they then began to enjoy themselves. Every hour of the day for many weeks afterwards the sullen thud of the explosive could be heard from all parts of the lagoon, followed by applauding shouts. Vast numbers of fish were blown to pieces, for no native would ever think of dividing a cartridge into half a dozen portions and using only one at a time; the entire 6-oz. cartridge was used, and sometimes so short were the fuses, that explosions would take place on the surface, to the delight of the children, who said, “it was as good to hear as the cannons of a man-of-war.” In the short space of eight weeks there were five serious accidents, two of which ended fatally. I was thankful when the last charge had been exploded, and although the natives begged me to import a fresh supply, I always declined—not on their account only, but because of the wanton destruction of fish involved.

One day I decided to try and ascertain if *oap* would affect fish by being swallowed. I prepared twenty or thirty small balls of the plant, wrapped each one up carefully in thin strips of fish flesh, so as to thoroughly conceal the contents, and took them out to the “turtle dock.” The dock, although it was a safe enclosure for turtle, yet had many small passages through the coral rock which permitted the ingress and exit of moderately-sized fish, particularly a variety of black and red-spotted rock-cod.

Throwing in the balls, one by one, I watched. Three of them were at once swallowed by a lively young hawk-bill turtle, and the remainder were soon seized by some yellow eels and rock-cod, before the larger and slower-moving turtle (of which there were about twenty in the dock) discerned them. I waited about on the reef in the vicinity for quite three hours or more, returning to the pool at intervals and examining the condition of its occupants. But, at the end of that time, the *oap* had apparently taken no effect, and, as night was near, I returned to the village.

On the following morning, I again went to the “dock,” lowered my line, and caught six rock-cod. In the stomachs of two I found the undigested fibres of the *oap* which, through expansion, they had been unable to dislodge; but that it had not had any effect on them I was sure, for these two fish were as strong and vigorous when hooked as were the four others in whose stomachs there was no sign of *oap*.

The young hawkbill turtle, however, was floating on the surface, and seemed very sick.

Here is a point for ichthyologists. Are the digestive arrangements of a turtle more delicate than those of a fish?

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK "FIVE-HEAD" CREEK; AND FISH DRUGGING IN THE PACIFIC ***

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