



THE SWORD-FISH.



THE sword-fish of the Pacific (*Histiophorus*) spawns about the end of September. With the new year the young fish arrive in considerable numbers at all parts of the island. The fish is not more than three inches in its entire length, the sword itself being an inch. The natives are very fond of these young fish. When cooked they carefully break off the swords, and swallow three or four fish at a mouthful.

The young fish return to the ocean to hunt the spawn of other fish, which often seem to cover the sea in the months of January and February. By the following September they are ten or eleven inches long. The tail resembles a steering oar, and possesses wonderful propelling energy. All Europeans who have tasted the young sword-fish pronounce it delicious eating, its numerous little bones being the only drawback.

By the third season this famous fish

attains the length of nearly two feet, and now for the first time receives the dignified name of *aku*, or "sword-fish."

It is rare to meet with one of these young fish which has not injured its sword. But, like the nails on the human body, it is being continually renewed, and grows harder every year of its existence. The perfect sword-fish returns no more to this reef, fearful of being caught in its shallow waters. It amuses itself outside in chasing small fish.

The sword-fish is believed to attain to a great age; for the terrible weapons which pierce ships and kill whales are necessarily the growth of many years.

Young sword-fish are easily caught in strong nets. The largest obtained in these islands do not exceed six feet in length; these *histiophori* despise the strongest nets, but are occasionally caught in the daytime with a hook baited with a small black fish. It not unfrequently happens that in chasing flying-fish at night the course of the

sword-fish is arrested by the stout outrigger of a canoe, and whilst struggling to extricate itself is easily made a prisoner.

One day a deacon of the church came upon a pair of sword-fish over six feet in length. As they lay still, close to his canoe, he observed a most singular circumstance—viz., that both male and female had lost their swords, the stumps only remaining!

The sword-fish, when fully grown, is ten or twelve feet long, and is the terror of fishermen in these southern seas. Numerous accidents caused by the half-grown sword-fish have come under my own observation. In one case a wrist was pierced through; the wound was circular, as the sword of the *histiophorus*, unlike the flat one of the *Xiphias gladius*, is round. The assailant speedily withdrew its weapon, and went on its way uninjured.

Late one evening a native came running in haste for some medicine for a young man who had been carried ashore, wounded by a large sword-fish. A *histiophorus* in hot pursuit of some flying-fish had struck the large canoe in which the young man was seated. The sword could not have been less than two feet in length. Both sides of the canoe were perforated; the knee, happening to be in the way, was pierced just above the joint. For some seconds the poor fellow was stupefied with terror and loss of blood. He limps to this day. In two other cases the thigh was stabbed obliquely, nearly dividing the femoral artery. Eventually both the injured persons recovered.

The worst casualty was that of a youth whose hip was severely injured by this formidable fish. The lad narrowly escaped with his life; but after several months' nursing the ghastly wound healed.

Natives tell of one of their countrymen, who, when swimming, was killed by a sword-fish piercing his stomach.

A friend of mine recently witnessed an interesting combat from the deck of a small schooner. The day was sultry and the ocean like a mirror, when a number of albacore neared the little vessel. At this a sword-fish, some nine feet in length, darted from its hiding-place under the vessel; the albacore, however, escaped. The disappointed sword-fish returned under the vessel to hide until the albacore should forget their fears and return. Again and again, for half a day, this process was repeated; the quick-sighted albacore at each onset evading their foe. At midday a light breeze sprang up, and the combatants were left behind.

The force with which the sword-fish drives his bony snout into the body of his prey is astonishing. In 1725, when his Majesty's ship *Leopard*, after her return from the coast of Guinea, was refitting for the channel service, in stripping off her sheathing the shipwrights found in her hull part of the sword of one of these fish. On the outside this was rough, and not unlike seal-skin; the broken end appeared like coarse ivory. The weapon pointed from the ship's stern towards the head; and therefore the fish must have followed and overtaken the ship while sailing. It had penetrated the sheathing an inch thick, passed through the planking three inches thick, and beyond that four inches into the timber. The workmen declared that, with a hammer of a quarter of a hundredweight, it would have required nine strokes to drive in a piece of the same kind, although the fish had effected it by one.

The captain of an East Indiaman, in a letter to Sir Joseph Banks, gives an account of a similar attack upon his own ship, so that the whole length of the sword was embedded in the ship. Part of the timber of the vessel, with the sword enclosed, is deposited in the British Museum.