

THE SHARK

by Eleanor Thomson

Even in Florida, most swimming pools don't come equipped with resident pelicans. This one paddled placidly around, his yellow eyes staring back at the gathering crowd of sleepy motel guests who were nattily attired in a strange variety of housecoats, nightwear, and slippers or bare feet.

At dawn that morning, two of the locals had decided to go shark fishing. Usually, the routine was simple and predictable. They anchored heavy rods inside hollow metal pipes which had been dug deep into the sand at the ocean's edge, then rowed out about five hundred yards to where the sharks were supposedly waiting for breakfast. A big hook was baited with bonita, a fish weighing about seven pounds, then it was dropped into the sea, and the men rowed back to spend the rest of the day sitting beside their lines, soaking up the sun and some cold liquids. Their entertainment increased with each beach walker who stopped to question, and the southern accents became even more pronounced as they boasted: "Yes, y'all bettah buleeve there's sharks out theah!" When the massive tugging and bending of the heavy line screamed "SHARK!", the men would use all their strength reeling the catch into the surf, knowing that they would be coping with no ordinary fish. This one would come well prepared to fight back.

They were in for a considerable surprise. On that particular day, a low-cruising pelican had arrived at the same moment the bonita was dropped overboard, and decided his breakfast had been delivered via room service. Fish, hook, and satchel-sized gullet met, the heavy bird tried to find a less crowded breakfast room, was effectively braked by the heavy line, and plummeted back into the sea. The men decided he'd have to be rescued. The pelican had other ideas.

I suspect that arguing with a large, powerful, angry bird, firmly ensconced in his own element, while in a small, wallowing rowboat in what should be shark-infested waters, could cause a Southern gentleman to fervently wish that he was back sipping mint julips on the porch. By the time these Southern gentlemen finally landed on shore, they were grim-faced, fishy-smelling, and dripping salt water, but with the ungainly bird clutched firmly under a muscular arm. Cutting the end off the hook made removal fairly easy, without too much damage to the bird's gullet or the men's hands, but when released, the confused bird headed for the nearest body of water - the motel swimming pool. Probably wishing he'd never left his piling in St. Andrew's Bay that morning.

Instant celebrity status didn't seem to bother him, and while cameras clicked he preened his feathers and tasted the pool water, fortunately left

without chemicals for the winter. Then, while the large audience clapped and cheered, he made a noisy, awkward takeoff, which would have effectively slammed an airplane firmly back into the ground. Granted, his runway was shorter than usual.

The men started all over again, this time keeping a wary eye out for low-flying freeloaders.

They caught a shark that night. Once again the varied assortment of bathrobes and slippers assembled at the edge of the beach; fascinated, interested, curious, and appalled that sharks really did come in that close to the place where we all swam.

Until then, to me, the Gulf of Mexico had always meant sand glistening like snowdrifts in the moonlight, with a beach that was remoulded and contoured twice a day by the tides. It had meant surging, gray, white-topped breakers on a stormy day, shouting with the power and force contained within them. And then, when the storm had ended, the quiet lapping of waves in all the shades of

green to blue, shushing over the hard-packed sands. Now, the beach had become an alien place, menacing with the rays of flashlights, the gleam of knives, and the six feet of thrashing shark at our feet. We were warned repeatedly to stay at least thrashing distance away from tail and teeth.

Sharks are noted as scavengers, people eaters, dangerous to boaters and swimmers. But to me this was a beautiful, fluid thing; powerful, sleek, shiny, and now helpless out of the watery home which had suddenly become its enemy. The eyes didn't look wicked to me; they looked frightened, forlorn, pleading, and very much aware that death was near. Again, camera bulbs flashed, cooks asked how to prepare the meat, and how did it taste, and fishermen asked about their chances of catching one. The tourists had vicariously joined the hunt. I left the beach before the shark's blood stained the sugar-white sand, wondering if I could ever eat fish again.

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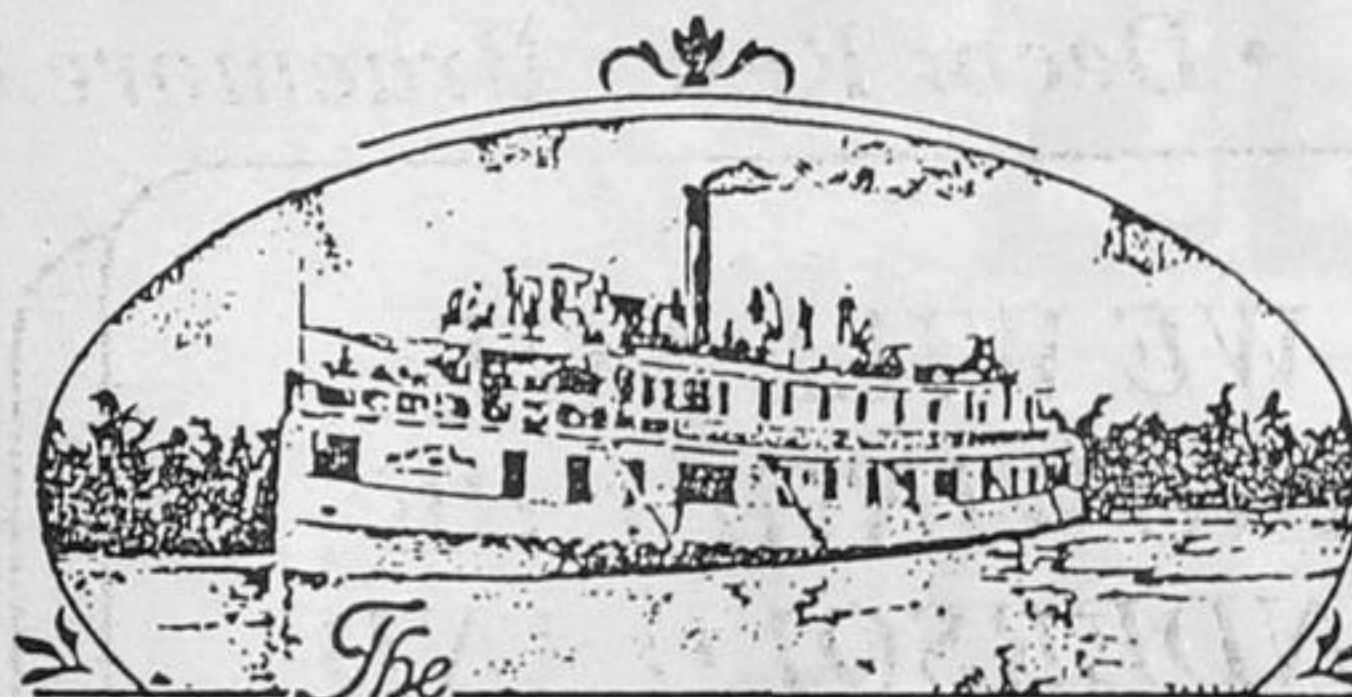
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