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*Shark Fin*

---Enrique Silba---(1898)

*Philip had a vague feeling that the deafening sound of the alarm clock was persecuting him. In his dream he was like a fainting fish in the water. He did not completely wake up, and dimly saw his wife asleep beside him turning around on the bed. He opened his eyes and saw a beam of morning sunshine on the lintel like a golden rope. He jumped onto the floor bare-footed and groped in darkness for his shirts and pants in a wood case beside the bed. Then he put on a pair of string-less shoes and then a grimy hat. He took out match from the shirt pocket, and lighted up the oil lamp.*

*A stinging sour and smelly air mixed with damp, sweat, and poverty made the room suffocating. Philip turned around; his dim eyes looked carelessly at his wife. Face down, her head was between her two folded arms. She was covered with a faded blue cotton sheet that had been darned, a leg outside. A fly flew around in circles before it landed on that leg. Next to her was a new-born baby. Its little legs crossed, two little arms over the chest, as if it was still in the womb. His other three children crowded on a single iron bed with three shabby chairs lined in front of it in case they might fell off the bed. One of the children turned around and*

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*mumbled. Philip stroked the child's legs with his coarse hand, in unbelievable tenderness. He hummed a song in low voice. The child heaved a long breathe, and fell asleep again.*

*Some people had got up in the courtyard. It was daybreak. He heard an iron gate was pushed open hard and grated in friction. Afterwards, a tramcar in distance produced unpleasant grinding sound. In the meanwhile, the croaking engine and ear-piercing horn followed. A man's heavy cough, and clumsy spitting in the end. Behind the closed doors were sharp clacking of wooden shoes. A child was talking happily with a man. The child said excitedly with admiration and laugh :*

*"Dad, look, the bitch was gazing at you."*

*Philip took a basket filled with fishing tools—fishing lines, hook, plumb, and a water jar—he carried it under his arms. He cast a final look at the children sound sleep on the iron bed, and went out.*

*He greeted to an old woman at the gate of the courtyard. She was very old. Her face was creased and haggard. She was almost only the shadow of a woman.*

*"How is Gamborosio?" He asked.*

*The old woman's ugly face showed the look of desolation.*

*"Serious, my child's condition is very serious. Because he was in danger,*

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*Messi last night wen to the Emergency Aid Bureau for a doctor, but the doctor would not come.*

*He said he didn't know what to do, and it was not his business. But this morning a doctor will come. I am waiting here for him. I believe my child will surely die."*

*"Nobody knows for sure. Maybe he will recover. And we all will die Someday." Philip comforted the old woman.*

*Yet their talk about death dimmed his mind. As he went back on his way, he suddenly remembered what happened on the afternoon the day before yesterday. Stimulated by instigation and impulse, perhaps even the most peaceful and quiet person would turn to a murderer and produce a tragedy. The incident was caused by shark fins. For a long time, like all the fisherman in Sharp Horn and White Hut, Philip avoided to fish sharks under unified management. The president of the Republic issued a regulation and conferred the privilege to fish sharks to a fishing company. Since that company couldn't fish sharks by itself, it planned to exploit independent fishermen unfairly. Before that regulation, shark-fishing was the livelihood of many costal impoverished people. At Downhill Street a Asian trader bought shark fins and tails, then rinsed and marinated them, before he shipped them to San Francisco in California. Like swallow nest and sturgeon stew, they were the most famous and expensive dish for Chinese. For each pair of fins they paid two dollars. This to these fishermen was a good deal. As for the other parts of the fish: spine bones could be made into buttons as pretty as ivory; those teeth could be used as talisman to drive away evil spirits; the head, dried up, could be sold to American tourists*

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as “souvenirs.”

Here, ever since the sudden issuing of that damned regulation, it was like a bumping Machine and drove Chinese traders out of the trade. Although at the beginning if judged only by theory, it did not look too bad. Agents of shark companies came to the coast and made a promise to the fishermen. These fishermen could not assess the content accurately. They thought what was promised was fair. They would buy sharks and pay according to their size. Those people's words were so pretty that the fishermen readily and gladly accepted their terms, even a little gratefully. However, it was soon proved that they were tricked. Things were not like how those company agents had described before. One “worm” (Translator's note: here it refers to a shark) was worth one dollar and it must be larger than normal size. Besides, when purchased, it had to be complete and undamaged. Not a single tail, not a piece of fin, nor even a piece of skin was allowed to miss.

Fishermen realized they were tricked, and began to protest, asking for Price raise. But the companies would not stop arguing and threatening them. They incited the president's regulation and threaten to imprison the fishermen. Thus they started to use their despotic power. In order that the regulation would not be defied, they had costal policemen at their service. Encouraged by the extra sum of payment from the company, the policemen were even more eager to arrest fishermen who privately fished sharks than to pirates or smugglers. This resulted in unbearable injustice, especially as the

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company took advantage of the entire shark, the injustice became even worse. The company sold the fins to Chinese, bones to bone button factory, skin to hide factory. Fish liver was manufactured into a high quality lubricant and sold in the market as whale oil in retail. As if not enough, they marinated small sharks were marinated—just born for several weeks—and sold under the label of “boneless bacalao.”

Everything they had done, eventually caused fishermen not to fish sharks. Even when by chance they fished one, rather than sell it to the company at the price of thirty or forty cents, they would kill it, cut it into pieces and threw it back to the sea.

Of course, Philip also took the same action as his fellow fishermen. However, just as he said: “When things happen...” It had reached the “climax” three days ago. He did not catch a grouper, or a black-finned, yellow-tailed cecil, not even in the worst a silver crown fish (CORONADO). Even if silver crown fish might spread disease, he could still sell it to the Restaurant owners. In order to make a profit, they would take the risk to Poison the customers.

Quite soon, a shark circled around his boat. It was a “flat-head,” as long as fifteen feet. Its fins were big and wide, like the sails of a small yacht. Philip instinctively started to wield his harpoon, but instantly he realized he must stop fishing the shark. He stared at it, and it was like a soft, black and huge body. It was indeed a giant fish. How much was its worth? Philip estimated:



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*swallowed the fishes one by one. After it was done, it docilely went under the water. In a few seconds, it emerged again and swam close to the stern of the boat.*

*The harpoon was flung with Philip's exact aiming into the back of the shark's neck. It struggled, trembling and convulsing. Its tail maniacally flapped the water into a whirlpool of waves. Its head suffered a fatal blow that was sufficient to calm it down.*

*After fifteen minutes, its fins and tails had been cut off from its torso,*

*The incomplete torso tumbled and sank into the sea and would become food of other sharks, like the bloody water mark after the boat, a silent complaint that quickly disappeared.*

*With a small piece of fish line, Philip strung the fins and tails together and hung them up. Then he returned to the coast. He urgently needed to get on shore as fast as possible, and arrive at China town to find a good client. Perhaps Ah Chen, the owner of a Cantonese restaurant, would make a deal with him. If he couldn't get any money, he would exchange the fins for some food.*

*Suddenly, unfortunate fate arrived in the shape of a blue uniform. As soon as Philip anchored the boat at the "dead corner," a rude and irritating voice suddenly shouted:*

*"Now you can't deny it: I caught you and your fish with my own hands."*

*He turned his head around in astonishment, and saw that policeman looking at the fins with a vicious smile. A moment of silence, and the policeman continued:*

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*"I'll take them away."*

*He bent down to take the fins, but didn't get them, because*

*Philip suddenly raised the fins up with his trembling right hand.*

*"They are mine... mine..." He shouted in shivers.*

*The policeman was started by the unexpected act, and for a moment he looked confused.*

*But instantly he reacted, hoping to retain his authority in the crisis.*

*"Come on, give it to me here. Or you'll be taken away together with the fins."*

*Philip stared at him viciously. This was a ugly, lanky and*

*clumsy man. His body and his shrill voice made a sharp contrast. He put*

*on an affected posture like a fighting cock. Philip unconsciously frowned,*

*veins jumping on his forehead. His muscles felt strong and supple.*

*He said in his mind "People look like that can't bear even one strike."*

*Meanwhile, Philip and the policeman were surrounded by some people fond to mind others' business.*

*"Give it to me, orr you'll regret."*

*"Give it to him, Philip." An old fisherman of bronze skin color persuasively suggested him. Then he lowered his voice: "Hope he would see a doctor!"*

*Philip felt numerous eyes staring at him, like a heavy burden weighing him down. Yet his human dignity, his resistance to unjust*

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*insult, mock and jeers from the onlookers, were to him*

*an ordeal. Besides, he was like a victim of unbearable and unjust abuse.*

*These all provoked his resistance. "What shall happen, let it happen."*

*"I am still waiting. Are you going to give it to me or not?"*

*The policeman urged in a restless, threatening and quivering voice.*

*"I will not give it to you, nor keep it for myself." Philip shouted, making a decision suddenly. He shook his head, and threw the fins back into the sea.*

*That policeman trembled in anger. He menaced to take him to the harbor police department. However, driven by rage into abnormality on one hand and out of self-esteem on the other, Philip refused to be arrested by him. Nobody among the people around them could foresee the result. Yet by chance, an army officer walked towards them. In an authoritative voice, he instructed the policeman to calm down, and told Philip to go to the police department.*

*"Just go. That policeman has to carry out his duty."*

*But Philip protested and gave his reasons. The policeman looked as if he was about to torture him.*

*"I am not going. If he is going to give me a bludgeon... good!" He trembled stammered these words, implying a threat.*

*Finally they made a compromise. He was to be arrested by the captain, not by the policeman. Exceptionally, this military man was a reasonable person, and he agreed. The policeman had to accept this solution, although obviously he was*

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not happy with it, because he thought it would somehow harm his authority. In the whole process on their way to the police department, he mumbled threats, and turned his head to look in resentment and anger at Philip behind him.

Now, as he was walking toward the shore, Philip recalled everything that had happened. He thought that if that policeman could not get satisfied, no, surely he would not, he might retaliate. For the sake of the worthless fins to seek trouble like this, it was not a good deal.

When he reached the grocery store at Cuba Street and Guadalest Street, he saw Gonga's father. He used to sail out in the sea together with Gonga, so he asked about him.

"Hmmm, he has been in the beach for a long time."

He suddenly speeded up. When turning toward the artillery fortress, his eyes were filled with illusions of that arrogant blue uniform on the shore. "Have been entangled in fishing lines—he thought—it should be the guard." Suddenly in his mind, the idea to turn back possessed him. He was not scared. On land he was not afraid of anybody; by sea he was not afraid of winds and waves either. Anyone who knew him all believed his courage. He was never fearful, no. "Yet it's better to avoid this." But the idea to escape

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*made him feel shameful, and it showed on his face. Then he was determined to go forward. He was nervous, ~~xxx~~ even his steps were heavy but firm. In his mind were concealed his hope and anguish.*

*After a short while, it proved that his instinct didn't cheat him. The policeman who had started the issue with him was right there. He was presumptuous and provoking, like an arrogant fighting cock. Gonga's boat had moored by the shore, and the sail sails on the mast had been tied up. As Philip walked toward him, he noticed the policeman was peeping at him.*

*"...That's unimportant." Gonga said assuredly and continued talking with the policeman.*

*"Unimportnat...? Not unimportant at all! I am the ox here. Look at this, if he dares to be disrespectful to me first, I will give him four bludgeons."*

*Philip deeply resented that joke of violent threat, and wanted to slap his Face. "Only to let him beat me several bludgeons." But he stopped:*

*"My friend, give me some peace. Isn't it enough for what had happened the other day?"*

*"Peace?—he said sarcastically, as sharp as a hookbill.—*

*Peace comes from bludgeons. You'll learn some good stuff that you never dreamed of.*

*The other day that captain saved you, ... But if you are disrespectful to me first,*

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*I will give you four bludgeons.”*

*Philip still tried hard to control himself. He sighed to Gonga:*

*“Look! Bad luck comes so early.”*

*The policeman said ironically:*

*“Now you are well-behaved, yeah? Why nobody comes over to protect you?”*

*His tone was so contemptuous and sarcastic that it drove Philip mad.*

*He jumped up and said:*

*“To protect me from you... because of you...”*

*The sentence stopped at his throat but anger destroyed it. One minute passed, a minute that was like a century to him. He wanted to speak, but fury choked his throat like a dead knot. Blood congealed into a lump and prevented from talking. Then, because he couldn't finish any sentence, he had a clear thought that his silence would be taken for cowardice. This idea made him feel as if his jaws were struck. The congealed blood rose up from his throat into his eyes, and up from the eyes into his head. Driven by blind, voiceless fury, he raised his fist to beat the policeman.*

*A dull gunpowder exploded tore up the morning quietness. Philip didn't understand what or why, and he felt he was suddenly under arrest.*

*Afterwards, he fell down on the coastal levee, his eyes staring at the sky in disappointment.*

*Facing the transparent blue, he saw a stretch of glowing cloud,*

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*“like a shining seashell,”—he thought. Very clearly he recalled, in his impoverished childhood he used beautiful seashells as adornment. He picked them up extremely carefully from the sea. Some were pure white with no stain; some were of soft light rosy color. These pretty shells, he stored them in a wooden crate that he used to put shoes and various items. “Now I need to buy shoes for my children. They run about bare-footed on the ground.” This idea triggered a string of memories that made him dizzy: his fight with the policeman, a devil determined to cause trouble with him. Did he beat him? An inexplicably relief and a pleasant tiredness relaxed his muscles. An inexpressible comfort made him fall asleep. Suddenly, he clearly realized that he was dying. Not relief, not comfort, nor tiredness either. It was just that life was leaving him, and he was dying! Have to live! Can’t die! Shouldn’t die! If dead, what about the children? He had to protect his life. That was his children’s life. He had to protect him with his hands, his feet and his teeth. He needed to shout, but his mouth was like dumb. Dumb, he was dumb, As if his mouth was stuffed with dirt. Yet still his was not dead yet, not yet! He felt the desire to see his children was like a torture to him. To have a look at them, even though only for a moment! His children, How were his children? He intended to make the image of the children more tangible. It escaped him. In vagueness, it appeared for one second and disappeared again. He heard far away*