

HOW SAMMY WENT TO CORAL-LAND

Chapter 3: The Star-fish, the Unsociable Oysters and the Pilot

by Emily Paret Atwater

It is not to be wondered at that our hero should feel a good deal of distrust concerning his host. To be sure the Hermit had declared that he never preyed upon fish as large as Sammy, since they invariably disagreed with him, and he was very polite and affable to his guest. But there was a certain suggestiveness about some of his remarks that was unpleasant, and his furtive, watchful gaze made Sammy nervous. The wicked old Hermit's mouth was really watering for this innocent, fresh-water fish, and he was only awaiting a favorable opportunity to seize him with his cruel claws. Fortunately for Sammy his instinct told him that the crab was a dangerous companion. So he soon found an excuse to leave the cave on an exploring expedition, greatly to the Hermit's regret.

Sammy's experience with the shark was still fresh in his mind, and for a time he kept close to the ledge ready for a dash to safety should danger again threaten.

It was a most interesting place to explore, this ledge. There were big rocks and little rocks, flat rocks, rocks hidden by mud and sand, and sharp, jutting rocks full of peril to ships at low tide.

In one or two places near the ledge the ocean was so very deep that Sammy never ventured to explore its depths, while from another point he could clearly see the sand at the bottom of the sea, and loved to descend and swim lazily about examining the shell-fish, sea-snails and other curious creatures that made their home there.

The long ledge had many inhabitants and Sammy was soon on very good terms with a couple of jolly sea-urchins, whose round, prickly bodies were half hidden in the little holes which they had bored in the rock. The sea-urchins made him acquainted with some relations of theirs, a family of star-fish living on a flat shelf of rock near by. The star-fishes proved very agreeable companions, being both polite and pretty. They had lovely orange colored backs, out of which protruded their five arms, or rays, giving them the star-like appearance from which they get their name. Under these rays were rows of tiny feelers, or suckers which they used as feet. With these a star-fish can crawl about, or even turn himself over if he wishes to, and if he is disturbed or frightened



these little feelers shrink up and conceal themselves in tiny holes in the rays.

Some star-fishes have the power of breaking off their rays, and, like the crab and lobster, can grow new ones to take their place. They have many beautiful relations in the star-fish family, one of the loveliest being the Brittle-star, so called because it will break in pieces when touched. Another relative is the Sun-star, which has twelve or fifteen rays, and often grows to a very large size. Its color is sometimes purple, sometimes red, with white rays tipped with red; truly a gorgeous creature, and no doubt very vain of his wonderful beauty!


All star-fishes have mouths and stomachs, which they put to good use, being exceedingly fond of oysters, and such like, which they suck out of their shells when opportunity offers.

One of this particular Star-Fish family, Meteor by name, proved very friendly indeed to Sammy, and through him our hero learned of a fine Oyster Colony which had established itself on a mud bank not very far distant.

Now Sammy was naturally of an inquisitive disposition, and an Oyster Colony being something new he was anxious to visit it. Meteor was also eager to pay a call, not so much from curiosity, as in the hope of extracting a fat bivalve from his shell for dinner.

So one fine day off the two started, Sammy swimming slowly to keep up with his companion, and presently they came in sight of the Colony. It was a large mud bank literally covered with oysters. Some were half hidden, others piled one upon another, and still others in little groups apart. Such a quantity as there were, and such queer-looking, dirty things, with their rough shells hinged at the back! Every mouth was wide open, eagerly sucking in the tiny water animals and plants on which the oyster feeds.

They paid but small attention to Sammy, but as soon as Meteor came in sight, shell after shell quickly closed, and the whole Colony immediately became to all appearances, a deaf, dumb and blind asylum. Not a sign betrayed that they were living creatures, and the disgust of the two adventurers may well be imagined. In vain did Sammy ask questions, and put forth his best conversational powers; in vain did the Star-Fish attempt to conceal his identity by hiding in the mud, the cautious oysters were not to be fooled, and finally, much put out, the two companions were obliged to retire unsatisfied.



“It’s all my fault,” grumbled the Star-Fish, as they moved slowly away. “I should have had sense enough to creep along in a less conspicuous manner. You see so many different kinds of sea-folks, crabs, sea-snails, etc., as well as our own family feed on the oysters that it makes them very timid, and they close their shells at the least sign of danger. And, of course, once the shells are shut the sharpest and most experienced claw is of no use. It is much easier to hunt oysters before the shell hardens, though it is not considered as much sport.”

“Are oysters’ shells ever soft?” inquired Sammy in great surprise.


“Oh, yes, indeed!” said Meteor, in a very superior tone. “Why I supposed that every fish in the sea knew that, but I forget, you are from the fresh water.

“The young oysters are hatched in the shell of the mother in the form of eggs. She keeps them for awhile, but presently sets them free, and although they are very tiny, they have eyes to see with, and can swim about. The oysters have large families, and I knew of one Lady Oyster who had two million young ones, but of course, only a few lived to grow up, since they are greatly prized as food by all fish, and delicious meals they make too, as I can tell you from experience.

“But about the young oysters: Well they are driven about by the currents and tides, and finally attach themselves to some object, like a rock, or hide in the sand and mud, and there they take up housekeeping for life, for, once their shell hardens, they cannot move.

“They are stupid creatures as compared with superior fish, like you and me for instance; but of course, since they have no head proper, they cannot be expected to use their brains. An Oyster has a large heart, however, as well as eyes, mouth, lips and liver, and he breathes through little tiny things like leaflets on each side of his body. I have heard that the oysters in the Indian Ocean contain very beautiful and costly pearls, as well as those in the Pacific, and other seas, and a good many common oysters have pearls in them too.

“They say that the two-legged land race value the oyster on account of the pearls, and that they are very fond of it as an article of food: and indeed I’ve been told that this horrible race of land creatures will devour or make use of in some way, almost anything that comes out of the water. How glad I am that I live in the sea, instead of on shore!



“However, as I was saying, the oysters have lots of enemies, and they make few friends outside of their own family, and no wonder when you consider how very stuck-up they are.”

“They are certainly very unsociable,” agreed Sammy. “Still it has been nice to learn as much about them as you have been able to tell me, and I am greatly obliged to you.”


“Don’t mention it,” returned the Star-Fish, affably. “I make it my business to know the manner of life and habits of the creatures I live upon, and a good deal about those I have to avoid, and it will give me great pleasure to give you any information in my power. And above all things beware of that old hypocrite the Hermit-Crab, and all his family.”

This friendly advice proved of great benefit to Sammy during his stay at the ledge, and indeed, all through his life in the ocean. As he acquired a greater knowledge of the ways of the sea he lost much of his timidity, though none of that caution that is the safeguard of every wise fish.

Each day as he took longer trips about the ledge, he made new discoveries and new acquaintances, and though these were all interesting, yet he longed to leave the ledge entirely and journey to Coral-Land. Of this wonderful, faraway country he had heard marvelous tales from Aunt Sheen, although she herself had never seen it. Ever since his smallest fishhood Sammy had longed to see with his own eyes the glories of this delightful place, where the coral grew, sea-flowers bloomed, and hundreds of lovely fish swam about in the calm, blue water. But it was a long distance, and he knew that many dangers awaited the inexperienced traveler. So, although he never abandoned his intention of visiting the spot which he had come so far to see, he wisely decided to wait until some fish more versed in the ways of the sea than himself, should be going in his direction.

To this end, guided by the advice of Meteor, he accosted several fish who might prove desirable companions, but for a time with no success. The Herring was unwilling to leave the school which he was going to join; the Cod was bound for Newfoundland with his family, and feared that a warmer climate would not agree with the children.

A short conversation with a Mackerel proved more satisfactory. Mr. Mackerel was in a great hurry, for having heard that a school of herring had gone on ahead, he anticipated a good meal, and was anxious to be off.



“This is my busy day,” he said impatiently in answer to Sammy’s question. “No, I am not going to Coral-Land, it’s too far south for me at this reason. But if you will wait here awhile you may see a cousin of mine who might act as guide. He is a Pilot-Fish and is out of a job at present. You will know him by the three dark blue bands about his body. Now, I really must say good-day,” and away he swam in a tremendous hurry.

For some time longer Sammy lingered near examining the different fish that passed, but none with three bands about his body was to be seen. At length a large fish of a silver color appeared, and as he swam leisurely nearer Sammy saw that the stranger was indeed marked with three dark blue bands. Surely this must be the Pilot, and as such he addressed him.

“Yes, that is my name,” replied the Pilot, who had a very shrewd fish-of-the-sea expression; “and so Cousin Mack told you I was out of a job, did he? Well so I am, but I was intending to take a rest before going to work again. However, I would be willing to take charge of you this trip as a special favor.

“Oh, yes! I’ve been to Coral-Land a great many times, and know all the regular inhabitants as well as the ordinary visitors. But as this is your first trip, and as it is always more trouble to pilot an inexperienced fish, I think I will have to make a little extra charge. My terms are usually one-half of all the feed, but in your case I think I should have to ask a little more, say three-quarters. Is that satisfactory?”

“Perfectly,” replied Sammy, delighted to make any arrangement, although he had a suspicion that the sly Pilot was taking advantage of his greenness.

“Very well then,” said the Pilot, “I will take you to Coral-Land on those terms, and will guarantee to protect you as far as possible, from all danger. I am well known as an excellent guide, the White Shark will testify as to my ability in that line. But don’t get frightened,” he added, as Sammy began to shiver at the mention of the Shark’s name. “I forgot that you are not on as good terms with the sharks as I am. However I am not on speaking acquaintance with them at present, and since I know their habits, will promise to keep you well out of their way.

“And now suppose we look about for a bite for supper, talking always makes me very hungry, then to-morrow I will meet you at the ledge, and we can start fresh on our journey.”