

A Newfoundland Terror

by Frank Aubrey, 1840-1927

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„BEAR away, sir! Bear away! Give that rock a wide berth!“

„But why?“ I asked. „We shall clear it by more than twenty feet. It doesn't run out under water, does it?“

„No, sir; there's plenty of water; but we never go near that rock. There's not a fisherman or longshore-man in the bay will go within a hundred yards of it. I beg you, sir, to ease her off.“

This sounded mysterious; but the old man's manner was so earnest and entreating that I felt he must have some reason for it; and I therefore put the tiller over, and we passed the rocky islet at a distance of seventy or eighty feet. Even this did not seem altogether to satisfy my two companions, for, as we ran past, they both looked apprehensive, and were evidently on the alert, looking for some danger that I could not see any sign of, and so could not understand.

IT was off Newfoundland, and we were heading for home—in Conception Bay. I was staying a short time with some friends near St. John's, and most days had gone out with two or three fishermen for a little cod-fishing. The two with me on this occasion were strangers, for the men I had generally gone out with were away on a more distant ground, and I had had perforce to fall back on others they had recommended to take their places. The evening was fairly calm, and we were running before a light breeze after an excellent day's sport. We had visited a different fishing-ground from any I had tried before, and the rock that so excited the old fisherman's alarm lay right in our course, but I had been steering so as to allow, what seemed to me, ample room.

Both old Donald and his mate watched the rock even after we were well past it; they still seemed to think I had gone dangerously near to it, and I asked what the danger consisted of; but I got no immediate reply. Presently, however, old Donald seemed satisfied, and, turning his gaze away, said,

„Well, sir, we calls that *the Sea-devil's Rock*, and with only too much reason. If you want to know why, you ask my other mate, Sam Wilney. We shall see him when we gets ashore, and he can tell ye all about it. He can tell ye what happened there; and it's somethin', I guess, that'll surprise ye.“

„All right,“ I answered, „I shall be glad to see him and hear his yarn. You'd better bring him round, and have a glass after you've brought the fish up.“ And so it was arranged, and a couple of hours later we were all four seated round a bright fire with glasses of grog in front of us, when Sam Wilney gave me the following graphic account of his strange and startling adventure. He was a fine-looking, stalwart specimen of the Newfoundland fisherman, with bright honest eyes, and I may here say that I afterwards inquired into the truth of his story, and found that it was true in every respect. I will not pretend to recall his quaint phraseology, but in other respects will give his account as nearly as I can in his own words.

IT was in October, 1873, that it occurred. My mate at that time was an Irishman, named Daly—Pat Daly—a good fellow enough, and a plucky boy too, and we had been working together for near five years.

Well, we started out in the early morning, and there was so little wind that I was rowing with a pair of paddles, when my stretcher broke—and that, I honestly believe, sir, saved both our lives, as you will see. I had to shape out another piece of wood for a stretcher, but the only bit I had was too thick and hard to be cut with a knife, so I asked Daly to fish out our axe, and he set to work hunting for it, and presently found it hidden away under a lot of rope in the locker. I was in no particular hurry, as we were drifting in the right direction all the time, and that direction was the rock that you passed to-day. It was called Bishop's Rock (though we call it Sea-devil's Rock now), and it used to be a favourite fishing-ground. In fact, men would get up early to get there first, especially if a man was single-handed through his mate being ill or anything, and when the first to arrive there had taken the best station, later arrivals would leave him to keep it to himself, and go on to other grounds. That was a sort of custom amongst us. But we were already then beginning to think there was something strange about the rock, for one day a man who had gone there was missing from his boat, and was never seen again. We found his boat anchored safely enough; but nothing to show what had

become of him. Then, a little while after it, another man disappeared; his boat was found floating about by itself, a good way from the rock, it is true, but it was believed he had been fishing near it, and somehow we connected his disappearance with what had occurred before, and men began to be afraid to go to the rock alone. In neither case was there anything whatever to show what had become of the missing man. Nothing in the boats had been disturbed, and in one a line was still over the side.

So Daly and I were going there together that day, and I was making for the rock with the paddles, while Pat was busy getting some lines and nets ready, when my stretcher broke.

Just as I had finished the stretcher and put the axe down, Pat, who had been looking across at the rock, says, „Hist, man! What’s that, then, over there?“

„Over where?“ I asks. „Why, by the Bishop’s Rock,“ he says.

Well, I looked, but could see nothing, and then I turned and looked at Pat, and he was staring with all his eyes.

„Faith!“ says he, „if I believed in the sea-sarpen I should say there’s one over there now.“

„What nonsense are you talking?“ I said. „You’re up to some game.“

„No, be jabbers!“ Daly declared; „I swear I saw a great long thing rise out of the water, wriggling an’ twisting about like a sarpen. Hanged if I don’t begin to think there’s something uncanny about that rock. Go steady now—go steady, and let’s be on the look-out.“

WE were getting near the rock, and I stopped paddling, and the boat drifted round broadside on. There was only a ripple on the water, and it was pretty clear, and I could see just underneath a great dark mass like a big bunch of seaweed. We’d got to about fifty feet or a little less, may be, from the rock, and the dark mass was rather nearer to it than half-way, I should say. I could see some dark streaks like strings of seaweed floating out through the water, and I says to Pat, „It’s nothing but a lot of seaweed, you fool you,“ when out shot *something* like a flash, and lay right across the middle of the boat.

It came so quick it was simply like lightning. All you saw was that *something* had made a great leap, and the next you knew was that there was a thing like a long serpent lying across the boat, making it rock from side to side, and dragging it bodily towards the rock; and before you could look round *flash* comes another one with a wriggle in the air, and a sort of flying leap; and then there were two long brown things like snakes lying right across the boat, and dragging it towards the rock. I could see quite twenty feet or more of each of them, and the boat got tipped nearly over, so that the gunwale on the side nearest the rock was every now and then under water, and it came rushing in over the side.

As for me, I was simply petrified, and sat like a stuck pig, when Pat cries out, „Chop it off, man! The axe! There, just by you. Chop, man, chop for your life!“ and that roused me. I took up the axe, and I tell you I did chop away. I cut clean through the two snake things, and the pieces I cut off fell wriggling into the boat, and the boat righted. Then I got hold of the paddles and got the boat’s head round to row away; when up out of the water rose, not one, or two, but four or five great

wriggling snakes and a big thing as large as a tub, with two eyes as big as soup-plates.

And then I knew what it was; it was a tremendous devil-fish, and it had been lying just under the water, hanging on to the rock with two or three of its arms. I had seen many a small one, and knew what vicious beasts they were, for I have several times had them spring at me and fasten on my arm or hand. When they do that all you've got to do is to catch hold of their windpipe and squeeze it, and they let go at once. So I thought this monster was going to leap on to us, and if he had we should have had no chance, for he'd have easily upset the boat by his mere weight, and could have carried us both down with him, boat and all. But, thank heaven, he didn't, for he only gave a great plunge and disappeared, leaving the water all round us black as ink.

Well, I thought very likely he'd come up again, so you bet I rowed. Yes, sir! And I never stopped till I felt the bow touch the shore; and then I think I almost fainted. Presently Pat drew a long breath and says, „Be jabbers! But that wor a near squeak! It's clear now what became of those other poor divils! Arrah, but we've got somethin' here to show to prove we didn't drame it all, anyhow. Let's take 'em ashore.“

So we did, and soon a crowd came round, and they all stood staring at the pieces we had cut off and listening to our story. And then we measured the pieces and we found they were 17 feet long, each of them, and 3½ feet round at the thickest part. Mr. Murray, geologist, came down and measured them too, and the pieces were taken away and preserved in spirits at the museum, and they calculated that the full length of the arms we had chopped off would be over 30 feet, and the *short* arms perhaps 10 or 12 feet or more, and the body 10 feet. In fact, they made out it would be over 40 feet long altogether. May be so, but to us it seemed bigger even than that.

WELL, about three weeks afterwards we had a great storm, and another one was actually thrown ashore a few miles away. I went over to see it, and it measured 32 feet in length. We knew it was not the same one we'd seen because it had its two long arms, and we guessed it must be the other's mate; so, for all we can tell, the beast we saw may live about the rock now, and I'm told they grow their long arms again when they lose them accidentally. So you can understand now why none of us will go near that rock. As for myself, I can never look at it a mile off without turning sick-like.

SUCH was the astonishing tale told me by the chief actor; but, strange as it may sound, I found no difficulty in verifying it afterwards, for I saw the pieces at the museum at St John's. Further, I may mention that the Rev. M. Gabriel has stated that near Lanaline, on the south coast of the island, a gigantic cuttle-fish was cast ashore, 47 feet in length; and that one was stranded about two years later, which measured the almost incredible length of 80 feet! These statements were confirmed by the Rev. M. Harvey, Presbyterian minister at St. John's, Newfoundland.

Again, in the *American Journal of Science and Arts* for March, 1875, Professor Verrill, of Yale College, Connecticut, gives particulars and authenticated testimony

of several, varying in total length from 30 to 52 feet, that had been taken or cast ashore in the neighbourhood of Newfoundland since the year 1873.

In connexion with this subject I may state that there is an *arm* of one in our own British Museum. It is preserved in spirits in a large glass jar. It is 9 feet long and twelve inches in circumference at its thickest part, tapering gradually to a fine point, and armed with about 300 suckers. Scientists have estimated that the cuttle from which this was cut off must have been some 36 feet in total length of arms, and probably its body would be 10 or 11 feet more—making a total of some 47 feet. The *beak* would probably be five inches long.

There is no statement as to where this piece came from. These large cuttles are usually of the species called *calamaries*. They do not differ much from the octopus, except in being somewhat longer, proportionately, in the body, and having ten arms instead of eight. These two extra arms are much longer than the others, and are called *tentacles*. Their use is to seize the prey and bring it within reach of the shorter arms, and these then carry it to the creature's mouth, which is a sort of bill like a parrot's beak. Some of the arms are occasionally found to be armed with *prehensile hooks* in addition to the ordinary suckers.

With regard to the various species of cuttle or devil-fish, there are the octopus, the calamary, the squid, the sepia, the loligo, and many others. Strictly speaking, only those are *cuttles* that possess the well-known piece of bone of peculiar texture sometimes called *sea-biscuit*; but the term is applied more or less to the whole family. Some have a bag of the inky fluid, known to artists under the name of *sepia*, which is used to darken the water around them to assist escape when hard pressed by superior foes. All, however, are alike in general characteristics, and none have any skeleton.

Mr. Henry Lee, for many years naturalist at the Brighton Aquarium, who claims, and no doubt justly, to know more than any one else of the octopus, says in his book, *The Octopus of Fiction and of Fact*, that naturalists now admit the existence of cuttles or calamaries measuring 30, 40, 50 feet and upwards in length; but adds that it is somewhat curious that all the large specimens of which we have authentic record have been discovered within a period of five or six years—viz., from 1869 or 1870 to 1876.

It has to be borne in mind, however, that these devil-fish have no skeletons to leave behind as proofs of their existence, as in the case of whales, etc. Thus, if a large one gets stranded on an unfrequented piece of coast, it would, in many cases, putrefy and disappear before any person, whose testimony would be accepted as decisive, could see it. Then the dimensions given by the poor fisher-folk would be regarded as impossible exaggerations.

Now, of course, in the case of such a creature of, say, 80 feet in length, lying on the top of the water, with its two long tentacular arms spread out, and curling up now and again above the surface, the two extreme ends would be some 150 feet apart, which seems quite sufficient foundation on which to build a story of a monstrous sea-serpent. Though it is only fair to point out that such a cuttle-fish as this is a far more awful monster than any mere serpent of the same size could possibly be.

