

DEVIL-FISHING

BY WILLARD W. GARRISON

IMAGINE a great, fat slimy something poked out of the water into your face, quickly followed by another slimy something and then another and another; each endeavoring to secure an option on a different portion of your anatomy, and you have one of the various joys of fishing for the devil fish.

But along the American coast of the Gulf of Mexico there are lots and lots of men who eke out their livings doing just this thing. For the man who doesn't have to fish for the devil-fish, it's fun, but to the man or crews of men who do it for their daily bread; well, they content themselves with a single catch a day.

Aristotle of old is recorded in history as the first writer on the subject of devil-fishing, but as he was exceedingly fond of Mr. Aristotle's health he left lots unsaid because he didn't investigate.

Every Gulf of Mexico sailor who fishes for this creature carries a hatchet close by, for that is the only means of getting away from the fish's tentacles—simply cutting them off as they are about to grasp the intended victim.

In the gulf the devil-fish is harpooned and seldom after one of these great prongs has been imbedded in the body of the victim are the fishermen able to land their quarry within two hours. Usually it takes from three to four hours of good, hard muscle-grinding work and then lots of times the crew of the hunting craft must cut the cable and lose the harpoon simply because the brute fights too hard to allow the occupation to be carried on safely. It is little wonder that one fish a day of this variety is considered sufficient.

Many wild, weird tales are told of the devil-fish. One class of stories deals with the creature's addiction to towing ocean-going steamers out of their courses. So strong is the deep-sea monster that captains of vessels have been known to wonder what was carrying them to windward, and



HARPOONING FROM THE BOWSPRIT



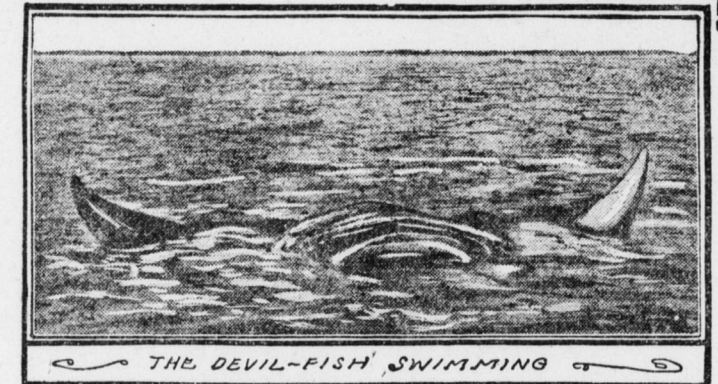
THE MOUTH OF A STRANDED DEVIL-FISH



TOWING THE DEVIL-FISH TO THE BEACH



READY TO LAUNCH THE HARPOON



THE DEVIL-FISH SWIMMING

upon investigation find that a devil-fish or cuttlefish was trying to bite off a corner of the rudder.

Numerous cases of the fish attempting and succeeding in towing ten-ton sloops for miles have been recorded in the annals of the industry. The devil-fishers always are compelled to put up a hot fight against this animal of the sea. The intended quarry will pull them far out of their course after the first harpoon has stung his hide and it takes two and sometimes three of them before the catch can be brought close enough to the sloop to allow the gunner to place a shot in a vital spot.

The fish must be continually worried or it will descend to the bottom to rest, in which case it usually takes the boat, crew and apparatus with it.

A story is told of a boat crew which had not had a devil-fish strike for two days until finally the harpoon expert on the bowsprit imbedded his instrument of torture within the vitals of one of the monsters. The creature, of course, went through the formality of turning the water thereabouts into a delicate black, this being one of the traits of the species when attacked. This done the devil-fish started for home, which was the bottom of the gulf. The harpoon expert hated to let go, on account of strikes being few and the boat, crew and harpoonist also began the descent in inky darkness. The craft being provided with air tanks at each end, the harpooned had some job on his hands, and when down in the sea about 20 feet, as near as the mariners could figure, the eight-armed namesake of the American trust gingerly climbed into the boat with the men who were seeking his life-blood. It being dark the fishermen did not perceive his presence. Once more at the surface, however, and there was a miniature fire panic. Regaining his presence of mind, however, the harpoonist put an out drop on his second throw and put an end to the pranks of the fish. That tale has been called "Just a fish story," but there are three deep sea fishermen to-day who vouch for the truth of a portion of it and they still ply that trade on the coast of the gulf. But now when the devil-fish starts for home, they let him go.

The manta, as the creature is called by science, is to be found as far north on the Atlantic coast as the Carolinas and in those waters some of the largest of this class of sea creatures have been seen. One caught on the Atlantic coast several years ago required three yoke of oxen to drag it from the sea and its weight was estimated at four tons.

Usually the devil-fish measures from 20 to 25 feet across its back when full grown and one mariner on the Pacific coast reported that he had estimated one to be 40 feet, which eye measurement, of course, is within the realm of possibility. The creature has two well defined plans of de-

with this there is the set of eight tentacles, which possess grips of iron and are lined underneath with "suckers," which, when in working order, form a vacuum over the object grasped and thus insure a firm hold.

So firm is this grasp that story tellers of several decades ago were fond of dropping the treasure-hunting hero into the hold of the sunken galleon and there bump him up against the "terrible devil-fish which had thwarted all human wiles and for empty hundred years been the guardian of the don's loot." The hero always won and captured the coin, being dragged to the surface unconscious.

There have been one or two cases where the cuttlefish has made its home within the cabins of sunken ships. In one case in particular off the northern coast of South America it is told that a devil-fish killed three divers who descended to lay plans for raising the ship. As each man was brought to the surface dead from a cause which none of his mates could guess, another was sent to take his place. Finally the trouble was suspected and the last man sent down gave explicit instructions about being brought to the surface upon the faintest tug at the guide line. After numerous trips up and back he succeeded in dislodging the creature by cutting off its arms one by one. Deprived of its arms, it fled and no further trouble was experienced.

Perhaps the most uncanny sight which ever befalls the devil-fish hunters is when, on a clear day, the denizens of the deep may be seen on the bottom walking along with the aid of their tentacles, which are used as feet. On land, it is recorded, this is a physical impossibility, for the fish, but buoyed up by the water of many fathoms, it's easy.

Though absolutely the most dangerous of creatures of the sea, it is said the devil-fish displays greater fear of human attack than any of the other species. The first move when assailed, is to try to grab the hunters with two or more of the long arms that stretch out as occasion demands. Failing in this the fish will attempt to get away under cover of the inky "sepia," but when caught with the harpoon and it finds there is no apparent escape the real tug of war commences and the struggles are never ended until the quarry ceases quivering in death. Then the cables which hold the harpoons are lashed to the stern of the craft and the sailors turn the vessel's nose towards home, the most welcome part of the voyage.

Study the habits and origin of the cuttlefish is one of the most interesting which any scientist ever attempted. The fish are propagated by means of eggs. The tiny creature at first has only one tentacle, which, when it grows older, gradually divides into two and then into four

and after a year or so into eight small arms. These grow larger and stronger as the age of the fish increases. Some adult specimens have been caught, the tentacles of which were over 20 feet in length. Jets of water squirted by means of fins constitute the method of locomotion of the cuttlefish.

The devil-fish's choicest occupation is that of feeding upon shoals of smaller members of the finny tribe and when interrupted in this pursuit he effect is terrifying. The great creature will toss several of its tentacles to the surface, still continuing to feed with the rest of them; and if this bluff fails to scare the intruder away, the devil-fish will come to the surface personally to see about it.

While next to human beings, sharks are the greatest enemies of the cuttlefish, the scavengers of the sea are just about as frightened by the tentacled monsters as the latter are by the sharks. Mariners have

often told of the battles which they have seen in clear water between these warriors of the briny deep, but accounts telling of the victors are scarce.

Along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico the sharks show their delight at the plight of the devil-fish when caught by following in its bloody wake and with wide-open jaws, seeking a bite here or there from the carcass. At night along the coast they fight in the water for the opportunity to consume the dead devil-fish after the fishermen have finished with him.

All in all devil-fishing is the most thrilling, most hazardous, most entrancing method of angling which has ever been discovered, for the creature is doubtless the craftiest of the inhabitants of the tropical waters. And the man who goes after the scalp of the devil-fish while he is not armed with modern accoutrements is taking his own life in his hand. The plain hardware store hatchet with the short handle is declared to be the best weapon of defense in close quarters and dozens of lives have been saved simply because the parties attacked were equipped with hatchets and knew how, when and where to use them upon the anatomy of the dangerous fish.

UNCLE SAM SEEKS STAMP VENDER.

Will the time ever come when Uncle Sam can dispense with letter carriers? The increasing use of the automobile, the pneumatic tube and mechanical devices in the postal service would indicate that eventually some method of delivering mail will be found which will, in a large measure, do away with the present system of distribution.

The postoffice department has an annual appropriation which is used to experiment with mechanical devices, and every year the officials are called upon to investigate the practicability and utility of inventions. There have been hundreds of different styles of mail boxes submitted, and there is no end of devices designed for picking up mail bags by fast-moving express trains. There is no doubt, so experts say, that the stamp-fixing machine will come into general use, and they are equally certain that the government will adopt slot machines for the automatic sale of postage stamps, as Germany and numerous other foreign countries have. The department has made an official trial of such machines.

A little more than a year ago the postmaster general appointed a special committee of officials to make a thorough investigation of the stamp-vending machines. Washington is now having its extended public demonstration of these machines, and other cities also will have a chance to try them for a long period under the direct supervision of the postoffice authorities.

When the postmaster general decided to make experiments with stamp-selling machines, he invited all persons with inventive tendencies to submit models. He did not confine the invitation to America. The result was that some 75 machines were offered for experiment, and the postoffice committee had a long and tedious task in selecting those that appeared to be practical.

After much investigation the committee selected a half-dozen machines for further test. To the owners or inventors of these six makes was given the opportunity to make public tests of the venders under the direction of the department, but at their own expense. Finally three different models were picked out for an extended public test at government expense.

Two of these machines are foreign inventions—one a German machine and the other the invention of an Australian.

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