

THE SEA DEVIL by Arthur Gordon

The man came out of the house and stood quite still. It was late in September and the night was breathless. The man moved forward and stood on the sea wall.

Somewhere out in the blackness a mullet jumped and fell back with a splash. He knew that a skilled man with a cast net could take half a dozen in an hour.

The man turned and went into his garage where his cast net hung. He didn't have to fish for a living but he liked to go casting alone at night. He liked the loneliness and the labour of it. He liked being the hunter, skilled and solitary and elemental. He lifted the net down and lowered it into a bucket. He went into the house and changed into swimming trunks and then with his net he started off to the sea wall to collect his boat.

He paddled into the darkness a few yards and then stopped allowing his eyes to accustom themselves to the dark. Somewhere out in the channel a porpoise blew with a sound like steam escaping. The man smiled, porpoises were his friends. Once, fishing in the Gulf the Captain of the boat had caught a baby porpoise. He had hoisted it aboard and dropped it into the bait well, where it thrashed around puzzled and unhappy. The baby's mother had swum alongside the boat and under the boat slapping it with her tail until the man had felt sorry for her and persuaded the Captain to free the baby porpoise.

The man banished his memories and paddled quietly through the water. For five minutes he paddled until he saw a pair of stakes. These stakes marked where the channel came out into the open sea and the water became deep and dangerous. The stakes stood out white. Even from a distance you could see how encrusted with barnacles they were. The man hated these barnacles. They were as sharp as razors and would cut your hands and feet to ribbons if you were dashed against them.

Twenty feet ahead of the man a mullet jumped. A big fish, close to three pounds. For a moment it hung in the still air, gleaming dully. The man stood up quickly, reached for the net and tightened the noose around his wrist. He heard the porpoise blow again. The man frowned. What was a porpoise doing fishing this close? A school of sardines surfaced suddenly, skittering along like drops of mercury. Something had frightened them. Then the man saw two swirls in the black water about eight feet apart...he thought they were mullet...he knew the net was wide enough to cover both swirls. The man swung the heavy net back.... shot it forward...it fell with a splash.

Then the sea exploded in his face. In a frenzy of spray a great horned thing shot like a huge bat out of the water. In a flash the man realised his mistake. Those two swirls had not been made by two mullet but by the wing tips of the giant ray of the Gulf Coast. The clam cracker, also known as the sea devil.

The man gave a hoarse cry. He tried to claw the slipknot off his wrist, but there was no time. The quarter inch thick line snapped taut as the sea devil landed. The man shot over the side of the boat and hit the water head first. Blindly he was pulled along for perhaps fifty yards. Then the line went slack as the sea devil jumped again.

It was close to nine feet from tip to tip and must have weighed over a thousand pounds. Up into the air it went, pearly coloured underbelly gleaming as it twisted in an effort to dislodge the clinging thing that was the man.

The water was less than four feet deep. Sobbing and choking while the beast was in the air the man was able to gain a foothold on the slimy bottom. He fought to free himself from the rope, but the slipknot was jammed deep into his wrist.

The ray came down into the water with a thunderous crash and drove forward again. The man's feet shot out from under him, his head went underwater again. Now he knew what a fish must feel when the line tightens and drags him towards his doom. Now he knew.

The ray was moving fast now and somehow the man knew that where he was heading, was past the stakes and out into the open sea. Freedom for the ray and certain death for the man.

And then, just at the channel's edge the ray met the porpoise. The porpoise had fed well that night and was in no hurry. It had no quarrel with any ray but when the great black shadow came rushing blindly straight at it the porpoise rolled fast and struck just the once. The blow descended on the ray's flat body with a sound like a pistol shot. The sea devil was half stunned. It veered wildly, and turned back towards shallow water.

The man had heard the tremendous slap of the great porpoise's tail. He felt the rope go slack again. He raised his dripping face, and reached for the bottom with his feet. He found it but now the water was up to his neck. He could think now and into his brain came a plan.

The ray started to move slowly towards the channel again. Instead of fighting against it the man made himself swim faster than the ray, until he was parallel with the great beast and the rope trailed behind them both in a deep U. He swam even faster so that he was slightly in the lead when they came to the marker stake. The man passed on one side of it the ray passed on the other.

Then the man took one last deep breath, and went down under the black water until he was sitting on the bottom of the sea bed. He drove both his heels into the mud, and he clutched the slimy grass with his bleeding hand. And he waited.

He didn't have long to wait. Seconds later the ray passed on the other side of the stake. The rope grew taut again. The man held his prisoned wrist close to the bottom, under his knee, and prayed that the stake would not break. He felt the rope vibrate as the barnacles bit into it. He did not know whether the rope would crush the barnacles, or whether the barnacles would cut the rope.

Suddenly the ray made a great leap forward, and the rope burned round the base of the stake, and the man's foot hit it hard. He kicked himself backwards with his remaining strength....and the rope parted...and he was free.

He came slowly to the surface. Thirty feet away the sea devil made one tremendous

leap and disappeared into the darkness. The man raised his wrist and looked at the frayed length of rope dangling from it.

He put his hand on the stake above the barnacles.

His mind was almost a blank but not quite. He knew three things. Never again would he think of barnacles as useless objects, never again would he go casting alone at night, and thirdly, always and for ever he would respect and protect porpoises.