

Catch of the day

Scotland, 1863- Nearly a kilometer off the rocky shores of North Berwick, near Edinburgh. James MacLeod pulled hard on the oars as his dory cruised through the early morning mist and calm sea, towards the waters that would hopefully allow him to successfully jig some cod. The morning air was cold on the hands, but it was nothing a good cup of tea and biscuits at home couldn't fix.

He knew that if his own hands were cold, then his son's hands must be near freezing. Giving eight year old Alex some more chewing tobacco, James began to sing a few traditional songs about long gone wars and honor to boost morale on the twelve foot dory. (As captain and father, it WAS his responsibility.) The tactic worked, for soon, Alex had joined in, a smile on his face.

As James eased off the rowing, he became aware of what sounded like a woman crying. Alex had begun to ask what the sound was, but James quickly put a hand up to silence the youth.

Just a few hundred meters to his side, he quickly saw what looked like a person, a woman he thought, hanging off of a piece of floating lumber. Yelling to assure her he was on his way, he rowed as fast as he could in the frigid waters towards the woman.

Everything happened so fast, but still, James had time to wonder how in the world did he not notice a woman in the water just a short distance from him, until now? As he drew the boat up to her, he told Alex to get a blanket ready from underneath the seat, and to go to the opposite side of the dory to counter some of the weight of James leaning over to the woman.

"It's okay miss. We got you," he tried to reassure her as he reached to her with the handle end of his gaff.

Despite the severity of the situation, the absolute beauty of the woman was not lost on him. With long dark hair that floated on the water, she had sharp features set against a darker complexion that would be generally foreign to the early Scottish. And her eyes. They looked to be able to pierce whatever they may encounter.

"Jesus. She's French." He unintentionally blurted out.

With what looked like a strained effort to reach for the gaff's handle, the woman feebly grabbed it.

Just then, out of the corner of his eye, James noticed a shadow of movement under the water, approximately ten feet from where the woman was. On instinct, he tried to pull himself back into the safety of the dory.

But it was too late.

The woman in the water had seen the fear in his eyes, and with incredible force and speed, pulled hard on her gaff handle, causing the hooked end to puncture through James's hand. Just before being yanked into the water, (in a fashion not unlike a fish being pulled into the boat), James looked back at his son and yelled for him to row hard to shore.....

....."Cap, you had better come see this."

Some one hundred years later, off the rarely calm Grand Banks of Newfoundland, just a few days prior to Christmas, on board the sixty foot long liner "Catch of the Day."

All five crew members stood on the deck, surrounding and looking down at what they had just caught. It was a long time before anyone spoke.

"That could be what's been taking the bites out of our swordfish," Connor spoke out loud, with no response.

Captain Stent took a gaff and pried around the creature's mouth, inadvertently grating the hook on the impressive serrated teeth.

"How do you like those gnashers?" Jack offered, to no one in particular, from behind his dangling cigarette. The only one on deck with a Santa hat on, he had fortunately forgotten for the moment that he was the resident jerk, and seemed almost normal.

"Think it's real?" Hebb wondered. "Sure as hell looks it."

"Smells it too," the engineer, Nibs, added. "Toss it back."

"Toss it back?" Jack was incredulous. And, back to his normal self. "Toss it back? This ain't some turtle or a dolphin. No, this here, this, is our retirement." At this point, he was pointing at the creature as if it put more emphasis on what he was saying. "No one has caught something like this before. No one. 'Till today. Even farm boy would say to keep it. Ain't that right, farm boy?" he sarcastically asked Hebb.

"What did I tell you about calling him that?" Connor asked as he advanced towards Jack. "I think it's time someone slammed your cupboard doors." Although Jack was taller, he was no match for Connor.

"Settle down boys, if you ever want to come back on this ship, or any other, for that matter." Captain Stent interrupted. Addressing everyone, he added, "Just because no one has seen one of these yet, doesn't mean they're not around. The oceans are too vast to assume anything. You can't find anyone on earth that hasn't read the stories and know what these things

look like. And, it looks a lot like what the stories say, so someone, somewhere, has seen these things. Now, we have proof. The coelacanths were thought to be extinct, and some turned up off South Africa in the thirties. Anything can and does happen in these waters.”

“And you want to toss it back.” Jack scoffed at Nibs.

“Well, you only want it so that you can stop working, because you are too lazy to make even partial payments to your ex and daughter. Whose birthday you missed last week, by the way.” Nibs glared back at Jack, clenching his fists. Looking at the captain, Nibs softened his stance, and continued. “The Portuguese have been fishing these waters for over four hundred years, and never caught one of these. This ISN’T (the grammatical correction was lost on Jack) some fossil fish off Africa. I’ve been on the water since before you were born. And, I can tell you this. There are things in these waters that know as much, or more, about us, as we know about them. And they don’t want to be seen. We need to toss this....monster, for that’s what it is, back to the hell it came, and drop our gear, and go. This is bad. How often are these waters dead calm like this? It’s a sign. But you are the captain. That’s just my opinion.”

Stent looked around the crew. “Boys, we are almost done the line. Let’s finish it and haul back in early for the holidays. This is big,” he added, pointing to the creature. “But, we are not letting the cat out of the bag until we land at shore. We will let the media know to be waiting. This is truly going to turn the science and marine world on its head.”

Turning to the older engineer, he added, “Look, I can definitely see your point. Honest. But there is no way we can ignore this. The broadbills can wait. Hebb, Connor, put it on ice. Then we’ll finish up here.” And he turned and headed to the wheelhouse. .

The four remaining men continued to look down at their catch.

The total length of the creature was about six and a half feet long. The top half looked like a tall, lean, preteen girl, about ten years old. With an unblemished, fair featured face, it had straight brown hair about three feet long, with a sea shell pinning some of the hair away from its face. Much like the way one would witness a human girl add a colorful accent to her appearance. The humanlike part was a bit less than half the total length. Where the waist was, tapered away from human appearance to something else entirely. A powerful looking tail, resembling that of a fish, completed the form. The grisly long line hook was still through one of its long arms. Long dead, it (she?) had still opened, piercing blue eyes that seemed as if to stare towards whatever direction the observer stood from.

While Connor ran to get a spare blanket off his bunk to wrap the creature in before putting it on ice, (at his own insistence, as the thing reminded him too much of a kid), Jack began to get the creature’s arm off the hook, trying to do as little damage as possible. Just as he was getting the arm off the hook, Hebb instinctively reached over to try to close its eyes lids. The now unopposed force Jack had been applying to the arm caused Jack to bump into Hebb, and Hebb’s

hand pushed down the creature's face, in the process getting a nasty gash on his hand from its mouth.

"Out of the way, farm boy." Jack warned.

There was a noticeable new vibration on the boat, then, an audible change, as the motor seemed to rev up, then die down.

Connor was just getting back, when captain Stent came back onto the deck. "We've got problems," he advised. "Something's not right with the prop." By now, Nibs was back on deck also.

After a quick discussion about calling for a tow back to port, or making their own quick assessment, Stent decided to put some diving gear on and take a quick look at the propeller. It was calm, and there were a few dry suits on board, so opting for a spectacle like being towed back to shore wasn't Stent's first pick. With a catch like this, they really did not want to be towed in.

With Nibs awaiting with a second dry suit by his feet, captain Stent took a flashlight, and prepared to go over. The ship's spot lights, as bright as they were, just didn't seem to be able to penetrate the dark waters of the night sky.

"With any luck, it's a quick fix," he hoped.

By now, Hebb's cut hand was already substantially red. And, starting to swell. Nibs noticed him favoring it, and, after a brief examination, sent him immediately to his bunk. Telling the other two to keep an eye on Stent while he was in the water, Nibs went to the galley and got some antibiotics for Hebb. Tracing the infection line with a pen and marking the time, he assured Hebb that they would be back to check on him soon. And told him to rest.

Going towards the deck, Nibs opened the hatch door at the same instant that a frantic Connor was. "You better come out here quick!"

Stent, it appeared, had been under the water for only a moment or two, when the dim glow of his flashlight suddenly went completely out in the dark water.

Scrambling, Nibs quickly got his own dry suit on, and was nearly to the point of going over to look for Stent, when Jack screamed, "Cripes! There's something down there!"

"Cap?" Nibs asked hopefully.

"Too big and too fast," Jack countered. "Unless 'Cap grew ten feet tall, and has a rocket strapped to his butt, that's not him!"

Dismissing Jack's thoughts as likely mere, exaggerated drama, Nibs advanced toward the ladder. "Hand me the harpoon gun," he asked Connor.

"Are you nuts? Something's in the water!" Jack tried to stop him.

"So is my brother." Fins, harpoon, and light in his hands, Nibs made it to the side of the boat. He had one foot over the edge, when he heard Connor exclaim, "I see it too!"

On the other side of the boat, Jack yelled he saw something again, maybe two more.

"It's got to be sharks!" Connor exclaimed, as they heard a sudden, audible thud coming from the bottom of the boat.

By the second or third thud, all crew on deck had stopped what they were doing, to listen. They were constant. Every five seconds or so.

"We drift into something?" Connor wondered.

"If we did, we would know it. Besides, there's nothing here to hit. Something's hitting us."

"Are you saying that you think sharks are ramming us? That's crazy."

"Listen to the steady rhythm." Connor said to Jack. Sharks don't do that. Something else is ramming us. "

"We've only got fiberglass for a hull," Jack had panic in his eyes.

Taking his air cylinders off, Nibs told Connor to go check the bilge area to see if they were taking on water. If so, to make sure the pump was on. Nibs himself, directing Jack to stay watching over the edge of the boat, went to radio a distress call.

Going to Hebb's bunk on the way, Nibs woke him up, to tell him he was needed on deck side, immediately. Hebb's infection by now had worked its way almost right up the arm. If Hebb didn't get real help soon, he would lose the arm. Maybe more.

Realizing that authorities would consider a real description of the situation as a possible hoax, Nibs would only indicate their location, that they had one man missing, one man extremely infected, and were possibly taking on water.

Help would be there in just over an hour, he was informed.

Leaving the wheelhouse, he remembered an old rifle in a case in a closet, and grabbed it, along with all the shells he could find.

He came to the deck to find Jack trying to move the spot light to follow periodic splashing in the water. It was in similar fashion, but a much larger scale, of the splashes a fish briefly creates when it breaks the water in search of flies.

Hebb was also on deck by this time, but in all honesty, appeared to be too sore and disoriented to be of much help. Connor was soon back, letting Nib know they were quickly taking on water, more than the bilge pump could handle.

Leaving the men on deck, Nibs went for himself to examine the water damage. Getting down into the lower part of the hull, the steady banging coming from the outside of the boat was much louder. Connor hadn't been exaggerating or lying about the water problem. The pump would never be able to keep the boat up. They did have a chance to last until the helicopter got there, however. He went back up to the deck, grabbing the immersion suits for each of the men on his way up. Before he made it on the deck, he could hear rifle shots. He came out to find Connor firing wherever possible at the splashes.

"We may need those bullets," Nibs advised him.

The constant thudding on the bottom of the boat seemed to be never ending.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

He went back to the bilge in the hull. It wasn't looking good. Water was steadily creeping its way in, creating an eerie ever expanding blanket. He ran up to check the coast guard's response time. Still a good half hour before help was here. Also, boats were on the way, but would not likely be any sooner.

Thud. Thud . Thud.

Going back on the deck, the boat was sitting noticeably lower in the water. Still the odd splashing continued around the boat, in such sporadic spots, one could only see the after effects. And lower and lower the boat sank, as it now began to list. The attack on the hull continued.

Advising the crew to don their survival suits, Nibs went to alert the Coast guard that it would likely be his last transmission. He was afraid of the boat suddenly submerging or tipping right over, possibly trapping him in the wheel house.

Fifteen minutes out.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

In what he thought may be the final few minutes of the Catch of the Day's sea faring life, he and the crew prepared themselves as best as they could for what was about to take place. With a humble compliment of just three and a half men, (as Hebb was in severe pain at this point), they armed themselves with the two harpoon guns , and duct taped knives, etc, to their hands as best as they could. The rifle had already been emptied at the phantom splashes, with no apparent success. As the men waited, Nibs looked at his watch. Seven minutes. Maybe the helicopter would be a few minutes early.

A few more minutes went by.

Nibs looked at his watch yet again. "On my command, men, we must jump clear of this ship. We want to get as far from her as we can. It's going to be violent when she sinks, as air pockets fill with water. It's dark out. There's going to be a lot of cables and floating ropes to pull

you down with her. When we do jump, we stay together. Waters calm. That's in our favor. Back to back. Face out, defend your area. Punch and kick for your life. That's what you do with sharks. That's what we are going to do with these devils. ETA is about five minutes. We only have to fight for five minutes before help is here. This is where you-where we- decide, are we going to man up and see our families tonight? I say yes!"

Knives taped to themselves, the men primed themselves up. Looking at the sea, Jack shouted, "It's getting real now, baby!" He still had his Santa hat on, over his survival hood. No one- and no thing- was going to ruin his holiday.

"I think the thudding has stopped," he noticed at one point.

"So has the splashing," Hebb also realized.

Off the distance, Nibs thought he may be able to see the flashing lights of the helicopter, but he wasn't sure. What was certain, was the fact that that they couldn't wait any longer to jump. The boat was too unstable, and could go under any moment, without much notice. They had to get clear of it. He fired the flare gun twice into the air, and commanded the group to jump.

They didn't stand a chance.