

111.—MONSTER SEA-SERPENTS.**By RICHARD A. PROCTOR.**

[From Knowledge, April 3, 1885.]

I have always been a believer in the sea-serpent of Captain McQuhae, of the *Dædalus*. I was a very young lad when his report of the strange encounter first appeared; but it seemed to me then, and it seems to me still, that the sea-captain had much the best of the discussion with the representatives of science. There was that cautious naturalist and paleontologist, Richard Owen, so anxious to disprove the sea-serpent that he pictured to himself the captain and officers of a British frigate frightened out of their wits, and out of at least one of their senses, by the sight of a sea-elephant (as he tried to make it out) rather far away from its native abode, and urging its course as fast as possible homeward. Captain McQuhae, in a report to the Admiralty, says that he and his officers saw a long-necked sea-monster traveling swiftly in the teeth of a 10-knot breeze on the surface of the sea, so quickly that he could see the waves frothing against the creature's chest. It passed so near that he could have distinctly seen the features of a man at the distance. He and his officers had a good view of the creature. (For a wonder they were not possessed by the customary desire to shoot it, a desire which speaks as honorably of the human race as the saying of the North Country miner immortalized by Leech, who, seeing a stranger, thought it due welcome to "eave 'arf a brick at un.") They rejected the sea-elephant with derision, as entirely inconsistent with what they had clearly seen; while the idea of their being frightened—well, Americans in old times tackled a few of our British frigates with greater or less success, but they did not find our seamen quite so timorous as to be likely to tremble in their shoes at the sight even of an extra large sea-elephant. Yet Professor Owen persisted in his belief that the *Dædalus* sea-serpent story was not worthier of credence than a story about ghosts. That particular ghost he thought he had laid.

Since then all sorts of explanations of sea-serpent stories have been advanced. Because one captain has mistaken a lot of floating sea-wrack half a mile away for a sea-monster, therefore the story of a sea-creature seen swiftly advancing against wind and sea, at a distance of less than 200 yards, meant nothing more than misunderstood sea-weed. Another mistakes a flight of birds in the distance, or a shoal of porpoises, or even a range of hills beyond the horizon, for some sea-serpentine monster, and forthwith other accounts, however manifestly inconsistent with such explanations, are regarded as explained away. Then, worst of all, some idiot invents a sea-serpent to beguile his time and find occupation for his shallow pate; and so soon as the story is shown to be only a story,

men of sense and standing, as incapable of the idiocy of inventing sea-monsters as I am of inventing a planet, are supposed to have amused their leisure by sending grave reports of non-existent sea-monsters to men under whom they (the seamen, not the sea-monsters) held office, or by taking oath before magistrates that they had seen sea-creatures which they had invented, and by parallel absurdities.

All this has been done in the case of the sea-serpent, as something akin to it was long since done in the case of the camelopard, and later in the case of the gorilla. Much earlier Herodotus had been called the Father of Lies instead of the Father of History, because of wonders related by him which have since been shown to be facts. The poor (in intellect and veracity) are always with us; and they can never admit that anything exists outside of what they know, or understand how any traveler in little-known regions can fail to lie lustily when he comes home again. Among the creatures thus specially ridiculed, the monster earthworm described by Rapp some forty years ago, was specially ridiculed, and those who believed in it, or declined utterly to reject it, were sneered at just as those who recognize the reasonableness of the sea-serpent are laughed at now. Rapp said he had seen in South Africa a monstrous earthworm, several feet in length. One of these he described as 6 feet 2 inches long, and proportionately thick. The measurement was regarded as no worthier of credence than Gulliver's precise statements of the height of Lilliputian and Brobdingnagian animals. The absurdity and impossibility of the thing was abundantly proved. A worm of the ordinary kind averages, let us say, 6 inches in length. Here, if this lying traveler was to be believed, was an animal more than twelve times as long, and therefore some 1,800 times as large. Now, the ordinary boa-constrictor is about 18 feet long. Multiply his length by twelve, and we get a serpent of 216 feet in length. *Credat Judæus, &c.* Rapp was demonstrably a vender of lies—so, at least, said the young buccaneers of the press. Well, there is now in the Zoological Gardens in London a living specimen of the species described by Rapp. It is not one of the largest. Indeed, these creatures are hard to catch and keep alive; and probably the biggest are the most difficult to secure. They are described as "fairly abundant in the neighborhood of Port Elizabeth and other parts of Cape Colony," but they keep out of sight unless heavy rains drive them out of their holes, when hundreds of them can be seen crawling about, but they usually perish soon after thus visiting the surface. The specimen at the Zoological Gardens is about 5 feet long, however, so that it is quite a good-sized worm. Here, then, is a case where a creature, the description of which excited as much ridicule as that of the sea-serpent, is found not only to exist in large numbers, but to be amenable to the customary treatment extended by our kindly race to the inferior races: we have captured a specimen and keep it on show.

Yet those who formerly laughed at the earthworm laugh now about

the fancied sea-serpent. They laugh so consumedly, and make so much noise over it—the laughter of such folks being “as the crackling of thorns under a pot”—that, as my friend Mr. W. Mattieu Williams points out, and as I can confirm, “much valuable evidence concerning the sea-serpent is suppressed by the flippant sneering of the class of writers who require no other qualification than ignorance of the subject on which they write. Scores, perhaps, hundreds of trustworthy mariners of all ranks, in both the naval and mercantile services, have seen what they believe to be such a creature, but they refuse to publish any account of their observations, knowing they will be insulted and publicly gibbeted as fools and liars if they do.”

The foolish laughed in the same way over the kraken, as you point out, and the monster they rejected as impossible has been killed and measured. Whether the sea-serpent or any creature whose prey is chiefly sought at a considerable distance below the surface, will ever be captured or killed is very doubtful. But their existence ought never to have been regarded as doubtful after the evidence gathered in Massachusetts in 1817, and the report of the captain of the *Dædalus*. There are probably several varieties of sea-creatures which look like serpents, and among these varieties some may quite probably be really serpentine. But some of the supposed sea-serpents must have really propelled themselves otherwise than as serpentine sea-creatures do, for they moved rapidly along the surface without perceptible undulations, and nothing but concealed paddles could have urged them on in this way. In my article on “Strange Sea-Creatures,” which appeared eleven years ago in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, several singular inhabitants of the sea—and in particular a monstrous skate seen in the East Indies—were described, and evidence given to show that even among comparatively familiar species new varieties are from time to time being discovered. Thus, though no sea-serpent so large as the sea-orm or sea-worm, described by Bishop Pontoppidan as 600 feet in length, has as yet been seen, it does not follow that none such exists, albeit, I cannot doubt that the good bishop’s accounts are very largely exaggerated. He was not quite so foolish as the modern critic, who, though perhaps he has never left his native town, undertakes to contradict men who describe what they have seen. But I fear he erred as far in the opposite direction. The boa-constrictor and the condor have been described in such terms by comparatively modern travelers (as Humboldt has shown) as would suggest creatures akin to the serpent which went for Sindbad, and the roc which also adorns Sindbad’s narrative and appears elsewhere in tales of the East. But to exaggerate is one thing, to invent is another. The man who is foolish enough to lie about his traveling experiences is not capable of inventing a new animal worth five minutes’ consideration; but, on the other hand, the man who, being sensible, is honest and truthful, is yet very apt to err in the way of unintentional exaggeration. I think poor

Captain Drevar's narrative of a long-necked sea-monster which captured in its folds and took down a sperm whale was a little exaggerated, though he and his mates swore to the truth of the story before a magistrate, and he himself was most unfairly punished by his employers for telling what he had seen: he was, in fact, ruined for life. ("I would not tell about it," said an old salt to Captain Drevar, "if I saw five hundred sea-sarpints.") But I no more believe that these men would have invented such an animal if they could, or could have invented it if they would, than I believe that an utterly ignorant man could have devised the famous lunar hoax—the clever story respecting a powerful telescope showing living creatures in the moon. Yet that story did not, as was alleged, take in Arago; no one acquainted with optical laws could have been deceived by it for an instant. To imagine that sailors could accomplish the far more difficult feat of inventing a new kind of animal without immediately exposing their ignorance to every one acquainted with the laws of comparative anatomy, is to imagine the impossible.

112.—PROPOSED REMOVAL OF FISH-TRAPS FROM COLUMBIA RIVER.

By AUG. C. KINNEY.

[From a letter by Prof. S. F. Baird.]

The State of Oregon has petitioned Congress to have the fish-traps here removed. A petition will be forwarded to-day by citizens of this place asking the Secretary of War to do this. The State of Oregon has not the right to remove them. There is no doubt that these fish-traps, projecting out into the channel as they do, have caused the loss of the lives of many fishermen who were fishing by the ordinary means of gill-nets, and that they obstruct navigation very greatly. I hope, therefore, that the Secretary of War will investigate the matter immediately; and if found as stated, have them removed.

There are other considerations favoring the removal of these traps which I need hardly mention, but which should have force in causing their removal. The fish caught are mostly those that run in shallow water, near shore, and nearly "ripe," and hence unfit for food. Next, a great quantity of other fish are caught, quite a number of shad with others, which we are desirous shall remain unmolested for a few years, also a great number of "steel-heads"—a large trout.

I cannot see any other way of avoiding a bloody conflict between the fishermen and the trapmen. The fishermen are very much enraged at the loss of the lives of fishermen who are dragged into the traps with their nets.

ASTORIA, OREG., *March 25, 1885.*