

DUNCAN NORMAN

THE ADVENTURES OF
BILLY TOPSAIL

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The Adventures of Billy Topsail

To the Boy who Reads the Book

YOU must not be surprised because the adventures of Billy Topsail and a few of his friends fill this book. If *all* the adventures of these real boys were written the record would fill many books. This is not hard to explain. The British Colony of Newfoundland lies to the north of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and to the east of the Canadian Labrador. It is so situated that the inhabitants may not escape adventures. On the map, it looks bleak and far away and inhospitable – a lonely island, outlying in the stormy water of the Atlantic. Indeed, it is all that. The interior is a vast wilderness – a waste place. The folk are fishermen all. They live on the coast, in little harbours, remote, widely scattered, not connected by roads; communication is only by way of the sea. They are hospitable, fearless, tender, simple, willing for toil; and, surely, little else can be said of a people. Long, long ago, their forbears first strayed up that forbidding shore in chase of the fish; and the succeeding generations, though such men as we are, have there lived their lives, apart from the world's comforts and delights as we know them. The land is barren; sustenance is from the sea, which is moody and cold and gray: thus life in that far place has many perils and deprivations and toilsome duties. The boys of the outports are like English-speaking boys the world over. They are merry or not, brave or not, kind or not, as boys go; but it may be that they are somewhat merrier and braver and kinder than boys to whom self-reliance and physical courage are less needful. At any rate, they have adventures, every one of them; and that is not surprising – for the conditions of life are such that every Newfoundland lad intimately knows hardship and peril at an age when the boys of the cities still grasp a hand when they cross the street.

N. D.

New York, *September, 1906.*

CHAPTER I

In Which Young Billy Topsail of Ruddy Cove Puts Out to His First Adventure with His Dog in the Bow of the Punt

FROM the very beginning it was inevitable that Billy Topsail should have adventures. He was a fisherman's son, born at Ruddy Cove, which is a fishing harbour on the bleak northeast coast of Newfoundland; and there was nothing else for it. All Newfoundland boys have adventures; but not all Newfoundland boys survive them. And there came, in the course of the day's work and play, to Billy Topsail, many adventures. The first – the first real adventure in which Billy Topsail was abandoned to his own wit and strength – came by reason of a gust of wind and his own dog. It was not strange that a gust of wind should overturn Billy Topsail's punt; but that old Skipper should turn troublesome in the thick of the mess was an event the most unexpected..

Skipper was a Newfoundland dog, born of reputable parents at Back Arm and decently bred in Ruddy Cove. He had black hair, short, straight and wiry – the curly-haired breed has failed on the Island – and broad, ample shoulders, which his forbears had transmitted to him from generations of hauling wood.

He was heavy, awkward and ugly, resembling somewhat a great draft-horse. But he pulled with a will, fended for himself, and within the knowledge of men had never stolen a fish; so he had a high place in the hearts of all the people of the Cove, and a safe one in their estimation.

"Skipper! Skipper! Here, b'y!"

The ringing call, in the voice of Billy Topsail, never failed to bring the dog from the kitchen with an eager rush, when the snow lay deep on the rocks, and all the paths of the wilderness were ready for the sled. He stood stock-still for the harness, and at the first "Hi, b'y! Gee up there!" he bounded away with a wagging tail and a glad bark. It was as if nothing pleased him so much on a frosty morning as the prospect of a hard day's work.

If the call came in summer-time when Skipper was dozing in the cool shadow of a flake – a platform of boughs for drying fish – he scrambled to his feet, took his clog¹ in his mouth and ran, all a-quiver for what might come, to where young Billy waited. If the clog were taken off, as it was almost sure to be, it meant sport in the water. Then Skipper would paw the ground and whine until the stick was flung out for him. But best of all he loved to dive for stones.

At the peep of many a day, too, he went out in the punt to the fishing-grounds with Billy Topsail, and there kept the lad good company all the day long. It was because he sat on the little cuddy in the bow, as if keeping a lookout ahead, that he was called Skipper.

"Sure, 'tis a clever dog, that!" was Billy's boast. "He would save life – that dog would!"

This was proved beyond doubt when little Isaiah Tommy Goodman toddled over the wharf-head, where he had been playing with a squid. Isaiah Tommy was four years old, and would surely have been drowned had not Skipper strolled down the wharf just at that moment.

Skipper was obedient to the instinct of all Newfoundland dogs to drag the sons of men from the water. He plunged in and caught Isaiah Tommy by the collar of his pinafore. Still following his instinct, he kept the child's head above water with powerful strokes of his fore paws while he towed him to shore. Then the outcry which Isaiah Tommy immediately set up brought his mother to complete the rescue.

For this deed Skipper was petted for a day and a half, and fed with fried caplin and salt pork, to his evident gratification. No doubt he was persuaded that he had acted worthily. However that be, he

¹ In Newfoundland the law requires that all dogs shall be clogged as a precaution against their killing sheep and goats which run wild. The clog is in the form of a billet of wood, weighing at least seven and a half pounds, and tied to the dog's neck.

continued in merry moods, in affectionate behaviour, in honesty – although the fish were even then drying on the flakes, all exposed – and he carried his clog like a hero.

"Skipper," Billy Topsail would ejaculate, "you *do* be a clever dog!"

One day in the spring of the year, when high winds spring suddenly from the land, Billy Topsail was fishing from the punt, the *Never Give Up*, over the shallows off Molly's Head. It was "fish weather," as the Ruddy Cove men say – gray, cold and misty. The harbour entrance lay two miles to the southwest. The bluffs which marked it were hardly discernible, for the mist hung thick off the shore. Four punts and a skiff were bobbing half a mile farther out to sea, their crews fishing with hook and line over the side. Thicker weather threatened and the day was near spent.

"'Tis time to be off home, b'y," said Billy to the dog. "'Tis getting thick in the sou'west."

Skipper stretched himself and wagged his tail. He had no word to say, but Billy, who, like all fishermen in remote places, had formed the habit of talking to himself, supplied the answer.

"'Tis that, Billy, b'y," said he. "The punt's as much as one hand can manage in a fair wind. An' 'tis a dead beat to the harbour now."

Then Billy said a word for himself. "We'll put in for ballast. The punt's too light for a gale."

He sculled the punt to the little cove by the Head, and there loaded her with rocks. Her sails, mainsail and tiny jib, were spread, and she was pointed for Grassy Island, on the first leg of her beat into the wind. By this time two other punts were under way, and the sails of the skiff were fluttering as her crew prepared to beat home for the night. The *Never Give Up* was ahead of the fleet, and held her lead in such fine fashion as made Billy Topsail's heart swell with pride.

The wind had gained in force. It was sweeping down from the hills in gusts. Now it fell to a breeze, and again it came swiftly with angry strength. Nor could its advance be perceived, for the sea was choppy and the bluffs shielded the inshore waters.

"We'll fetch the harbour on the next tack," Billy muttered to Skipper, who was whining in the bow.

He put the steering oar hard alee to bring the punt about. A gust caught the sails. The boat heeled before it, and her gunwale was under water before Billy could make a move to save her. The wind forced her down, pressing heavily upon the canvas.

"Easy!" screamed Billy.

But the ballast of the *Never Give Up* shifted, and she toppled over. Boy and dog were thrown into the sea – the one aft, the other forward. Billy dived deep to escape entanglement with the rigging of the boat. He had long ago learned the lesson that presence of mind wins half the fight in perilous emergencies. The coward miserably perishes where the brave man survives. With his courage leaping to meet his predicament, he struck out for windward and rose to the surface.

He looked about for the punt. She had been heavily weighted with ballast, and he feared for her. What was he to do if she had been too heavily weighted? Even as he looked she sank. She had righted under water; the tip of the mast was the last he saw of her.

The sea – cold, fretful, vast – lay all about him. The coast was half a mile to windward; the punts, out to sea, were laboriously beating towards him, and could make no greater speed. He had to choose between the punts and the rocks.

A whine – with a strange note in it – attracted his attention. The big dog had caught sight of him, and was beating the water in a frantic effort to approach quickly. But the dog had never whined like that before.

"Hi, Skipper!" Billy called. "Steady, b'y! Steady!"

Billy took off his boots as fast as he could. The dog was coming nearer, still whining strangely, and madly pawing the water. Billy was mystified. What possessed the dog? It was as if he had been seized with a fit of terror. Was he afraid of drowning? His eyes were fairly flaring. Such a light had never been in them before.

In the instant he had for speculation the boy lifted himself high in the water and looked intently into the dog's eyes. It was terror he saw in them; there could be no doubt about that, he thought. The dog was afraid for his life. At once Billy was filled with dread. He could not crush the feeling down. Afraid of Skipper – the old, affectionate Skipper – his own dog, which he had reared from a puppy! It was absurd.

But he *was* afraid, nevertheless – and he was desperately afraid.

"Back, b'y!" he cried. "Get back, sir!"

CHAPTER II

Concerning the Behaviour of Billy Topsail and His Dog in the Water When the *Never Give Up* Went to the Bottom, and Closing With an Apology and a Wag of the Tail

IT chanced that Billy Topsail was a strong swimmer. He had learned to swim where the water is cold – cold, often, as the icebergs stranded in the harbour can make it. The water was bitter cold now; but he did not fear it; nor did he doubt that he could accomplish the long swim which lay before him. It was the unaccountable behaviour of the dog which disturbed him – his failure in obedience, which could not be explained. The dog was now within three yards, and excited past all reason.

"Back, sir!" Billy screamed. "Get back with you!"

Skipper was not deterred by the command. He did not so much as hesitate. Billy raised his hand as if to strike him – a threatening gesture which had sent Skipper home with his tail between his legs many a time. But it had no effect now.

"Get back!" Billy screamed again.

It was plain that the dog was not to be bidden. Billy threw himself on his back, supported himself with his hands and kicked at the dog with his feet.

Skipper was blinded by the splashing. He whined and held back. Then blindly he came again. Billy moved slowly from him, head foremost, still churning the water with his feet. But, swimming thus, he was no match for the dog. With his head thrown back to escape the blows, Skipper forged after him. He was struck in the jaws, in the throat, and again in the jaws. But he pawed on, taking every blow without complaint, and gaining inch by inch. Soon he was so close that the lad could no longer move his feet freely. Then the dog chanced to catch one foot with his paw, and forced it under. Billy could not beat him off.

No longer opposed, the dog crept up – paw over paw, forcing the boy's body lower and lower. His object was clear to Billy. Skipper, frenzied by terror, the boy thought, would try to save himself by climbing on his shoulders.

"Skipper!" he cried. "You'll drown me! Get back!"

The futility of attempting to command obedience from a crazy dog struck Billy Topsail with force. He must act otherwise, and that quickly, if he were to escape. There seemed to be but one thing to do. He took a long breath and let himself sink – down – down – as deep as he dared. Down – down – until he retained breath sufficient but to strike to the right and rise again.

The dog – as it was made known later – rose as high as he could force himself, and looked about in every direction, with his mouth open and his ears rigidly cocked. He gave two sharp barks, like sobs, and a long, mournful whine. Then, as if acting upon sudden thought, he dived.

For a moment nothing was to be seen of either boy or dog. There was nothing but a choppy sea in that place. Men who were watching thought that both had followed the *Never Give Up* to the bottom.

In the momentary respite under water Billy perceived that his situation was desperate. He would rise, he was sure, but only to renew the struggle. How long he could keep the dog off he could not tell. Until the punts came down to his aid? He thought not.

He came to the surface prepared to dive again. But Skipper had disappeared. An ejaculation of thanksgiving was yet on the boy's lips when the dog's black head rose and moved swiftly towards him. Billy had a start of ten yards – or something more.

He turned on his side and set off at top speed. There was no better swimmer among the lads of the harbour. Was he a match for a powerful Newfoundland dog? It was soon evident that he was not.

Skipper gained rapidly. Billy felt a paw strike his foot. He put more strength into his strokes. Next the paw struck the calf of his leg. The dog was upon him now – pawing his back. Billy could not sustain the weight. To escape, that he might take up the fight in another way, he dived again.

The dog was waiting when Billy came up – waiting eagerly, on the alert to continue the chase.

"Skipper, old fellow – good old dog!" Billy called in a soothing voice. "Steady, sir! Down, sir – back!"

The dog was not to be deceived. He came, by turns whining and gasping. He was more excited, more determined, than ever. Billy waited for him. The fight was to be face to face. The boy had determined to keep him off with his hands until strength failed – to drown him if he could. All love for the dog had gone out of his heart. The weeks of close and merry companionship, of romps and rambles and sport, were forgotten. Billy was fighting for life. So he waited without pity, hoping only that his strength might last until he had conquered.

When the dog was within reach Billy struck him in the face. A snarl and an angry snap were the result.

Rage seemed suddenly to possess the dog. He held back for a moment, growling fiercely, and then attacked with a rush. Billy fought as best he could, trying to clutch his enemy by the neck and to force his head beneath the waves. The effort was vain; the dog eluded his grasp and renewed the attack. In another moment he had laid his heavy paws on the boy's shoulders.

The weight was too much for Billy. Down he went; freed himself, and struggled to the surface, gasping for breath. It appeared to him now that he had but a moment to live. He felt his self-possession going from him – and at that moment his ears caught the sound of a voice.

"Put your arm – "

The voice seemed to come from far away. Before the sentence was completed, the dog's paws were again on Billy's shoulders and the water stopped the boy's hearing. What were they calling to him? The thought that some helping hand was near inspired him. With this new courage to aid, he dived for the third time. The voice was nearer – clearer – when he came up, and he heard every word.

"Put your arm around his neck!" one man cried.

"Catch him by the scruff of the neck!" cried another.

Billy's self-possession returned. He would follow this direction. Skipper swam anxiously to him. It may be that he wondered what this new attitude meant. It may be that he hoped reason had returned to the boy – that at last he would allow himself to be saved. Billy caught the dog by the scruff of the neck when he was within arm's length. Skipper wagged his tail and turned about.

There was a brief pause, during which the faithful old dog determined upon the direction he would take. He espied the punts, which had borne down with all speed. Towards them he swam, and there was something of pride in his mighty strokes, something of exultation in his whine. Billy struck out with his free hand, and soon boy and dog were pulled over the side of the nearest punt.

Through it all, as Billy now knew, the dog had only wanted to save him.

That night Billy Topsail took Skipper aside for a long and confidential talk. "Skipper," said he, "I beg your pardon. You see, I didn't know what 'twas you wanted. I'm sorry I ever had a hard thought against you, and I'm sorry I tried to drown you. When I thought you only wanted to save yourself, 'twas Billy Topsail you were thinking of. When I thought you wanted to climb atop of me, 'twas my collar you wanted to catch. When I thought you wanted to bite me, 'twas a scolding you were giving me for my foolishness. Skipper, b'y, honest, I beg your pardon. Next time I'll know that all a Newfoundland dog wants is half a chance to tow me ashore. And I'll give him a whole chance. But, Skipper, don't you think you might have given me a chance to do something for myself?"

At which Skipper wagged his tail.

CHAPTER III

Describing the Haunts and Habits of Devil-Fish and Informing the Reader of Billy Topsail's Determination to Make a Capture at all Hazards

WHEN the Minister of Justice for the colony of Newfoundland went away from Ruddy Cove by the bay steamer, he chanced to leave an American magazine at the home of Billy Topsail's father, where he had passed the night. The magazine contained an illustrated article on the gigantic species of cephalopods² popularly known as devil-fish.

Billy Topsail did not know what a cephalopod was; but he did know a squid when he saw its picture, for Ruddy Cove is a fishing harbour, and he had caught many a thousand for bait. So when he found that to the lay mind a squid and a cephalopod were one and the same, save in size, he read the long article from beginning to end, doing the best he could with the strange, long words.

So interested was he that he read it again; and by that time he had learned enough to surprise him, even to terrify him, notwithstanding the writer's assurance that the power and ferocity of the creatures had generally been exaggerated.

He was a lad of sound common sense. He had never wholly doubted the tales of desperate encounters with devil-fish, told in the harbour these many years; for the various descriptions of how the long, slimy arms had curled about the punts had rung too true to be quite disbelieved; but he had considered them somewhat less credible than certain wild yarns of shipwreck, and somewhat more credible than the bedtime stories of mermaids which the grandmothers told the children of the place.

Here, however, in plain print, was described the capture of a giant squid in a bay which lay beyond a point of land that Billy could see from the window.

That afternoon Billy put out in his leaky old punt to "jig" squid for bait. He was so disgusted with the punt – so ashamed of the squat, weather-worn, rotten cast-off – that he wished heartily for a new one all the way to the grounds. The loss of the *Never Give Up* had brought him to humiliating depths.

But when he had once joined the little fleet of boats, he cheerfully threw his grapnel into Bobby Lot's punt and beckoned Bobby aboard. Then, as together they drew the writhing-armed, squirting little squids from the water, he told of the "big squids" which lurked in the deep water beyond the harbour; and all the time Bobby opened his eyes wider and wider.

"Is they just like squids?" Bobby asked.

"But bigger," answered Billy. "Their bodies is so big as hogsheads. Their arms is thirty-five feet long."

Bobby picked a squid from the heap in the bottom of the boat. It had instinctively turned from a reddish-brown to a livid green, the colour of sea-water; indeed, had it been in the water, its enemy would have had hard work to see it.

² "The early literature of natural history has, from very remote times, contained allusions to huge species of cephalopods, often accompanied by more or less fabulous and usually exaggerated descriptions of the creatures... The description of the 'poulpe,' or devil-fish, by Victor Hugo, in 'Toilers of the Sea,' with which so many readers are familiar, is quite as fabulous and unreal as any of the earlier accounts, and even more bizarre... Special attention has only recently been called to the frequent occurrence of these 'big squids,' as our fishermen call them, in the waters of Newfoundland and the adjacent coasts... I have been informed by many other fishermen that the 'big squids' are occasionally taken on the Grand Banks and used for bait. Nearly all the specimens hitherto taken appear to have been more or less disabled when first observed, otherwise they probably would not appear at the surface in the daytime. From the fact that they have mostly come ashore in the night, I infer that they inhabit chiefly the very deep and cold fiords of Newfoundland, and come to the surface only in the night." – From the "Report on the Cephalopods of the Northeastern Coast of America," by A. E. Verrill. Extracted from a report of the Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries, issued by the Government Printing Office at Washington. In this report twenty-five specimens of the large species taken in Newfoundland are described in detail.

He handled it gingerly; but the ugly little creature managed somehow to twine its slender arms about his hand, and swiftly to take hold with a dozen cup-like suckers. The boy uttered an exclamation of disgust, and shook it off. Then he shuddered, laughed at himself, shuddered again. A moment later he chose a dead squid for examination.

"Leave us look at it close," said he. "Then we'll know what a real devil-fish is like. Sure, I've been wantin' to know that for a long, long time."

They observed the long, cylindrical body, flabby and cold, with the broad, flap-like tail attached. The head was repulsively ugly – perhaps because of the eyes, which were disproportionately large, brilliant, and, in the live squid, ferocious.

A group of arms – two long, slender, tentacular arms, and eight shorter, thicker ones – projected from the region of the mouth, which, indeed, was set in the centre of the ring they formed at the roots. They were equipped with innumerable little suckers, were flexible and active, and as long as the head, body and tail put together.

Closer examination revealed that there was a horny beak, like a parrot's, in the mouth, and that on the under side of the head was a curious tube-like structure.

"Oh, that's his squirter!" Billy explained. "When he wants to back up he points that forward, and squirts out water so hard as he can; and when he wants to go ahead he points it backward, and does the same thing. That's where his ink comes from, too, when he wants to make the water so dirty nobody can see him."

"What does he do with his beak?"

"When he gets his food in his arms he bites out pieces with his beak. He hasn't any teeth; but he's got something just as good – a tongue like a rasp."

"I wouldn't like to be cotched by a squid as big as a hoghead," Bobby remarked, timidly.

"Hut!" said Billy, grimly. "He'd make short work o' *you!* Why, b'y, they weighs half a ton apiece! I isn't much afraid, though," he added. "They're only squid. Afore I read about them in the book I used to think they was worse than they is – terrible ghostlike things. But they're no worse than squids, only bigger, and – "

"They're bad enough for *me*," Bobby interrupted.

"And," Billy concluded, "they only comes up in the night or when they're sore wounded and dyin'."

"I'm not goin' out at night, if I can help it," said Bobby, with a canny shake of the head.

"If they was a big squid come up the harbour to your house," said Billy, after a pause, "and got close to the rock, he could put one o' they two long arms in your bedroom window, and – "

"'Tis in the attic!"

"Never mind that. He could put it in the window and feel around for your bed, and twist that arm around you, and – "

"I'd cut it off!"

"Anyhow, that's how long they is. And if he knowed you was there, and wanted you, he could get you. But I'm not so sure that he *would* want you. He couldn't see you, anyhow; and if he could, he'd rather have a good fat salmon."

Bobby shuddered as he looked at the tiny squid in his hand, and thought of the dreadful possibilities in one a thousand times as big.

"You leave them alone, and they'll leave you alone," Billy went on. "But if you once make them mad, they can dart their arms out like lightning. 'Tis time to get, then!"

"I'm goin' to keep an axe in my punt after this," said Bobby, "and if I sees an arm slippin' out of the water – "

"'Tis as big as your thigh!" cried Billy.

"Never mind. If I sees it I'll be able to cut it off."

"If I sees one," said Billy, "I'm goin' to cotch it. It said in the book that they was worth a lot to some people. And if I can sell mine I'm goin' to have a new punt."

But although Bobby Lot and Billy Topsail kept a sharp lookout for giant squids wherever they went, they were not rewarded. There was not so much as a sign of one. By and by, so bold did they become, they hunted for one in the twilight of summer days, even daring to pry into the deepest coves and holes in the Ruddy Cove rocks.

Notwithstanding the ridicule he had to meet, Bobby never ventured out in the punt without a sharp axe. He could not tell what time he would need it, he said; and thus he formed the habit of making sure that it was in its place before casting off from the wharf.

As autumn drew near they found other things to think of; the big squids passed out of mind altogether.

"Wonderful queer," Billy said, long afterwards, "how things happen when you isn't expectin' them!"

CHAPTER IV

Recounting the Adventure of the Giant Squid of Chain Tickle, in Which the Punt Gets in the Grip of a Gigantic Tentacle and Billy Topsail Strikes With an Axe

ONE day late in September – it was near evening of a gray day – Billy Topsail and Bobby Lot were returning in Bobby's punt from Birds' Nest Islands, whither they had gone to hunt a group of seals, reported to have taken up a temporary residence there. They had a mighty, muzzle-loading, flintlock gun; and they were so delighted with the noise it made that they had exhausted their scanty provision of powder and lead long before the seals were in sight.

They had taken the shortest way home. It lay past Chain Hole, a small, landlocked basin, very deep, with a narrow entrance, which was shallow at low tide. The entrance opened into a broad bay, and was called Chain Tickle.

"What's that in the tickle?" Billy exclaimed, as they were rowing past.

It was a black object, apparently floating quietly on the surface of the water. The boys gazed at it for a long time, but could make nothing of it. They were completely puzzled.

"'Tis a small bit o' wreck, I'm thinkin'," said Bobby. "Leave us row close and see."

"Maybe 'tis a capsized punt."

When they were within about thirty yards of the object they lay on their oars. For some unaccountable reason they did not care to venture nearer. Twilight was then fast approaching. The light was already beginning to fail.

"'Tis a wonderful queer thing!" Billy muttered, his curiosity getting the better of him. "Row ahead, Bobby. We'll go alongside."

"They's something movin' on it!" Bobby whispered, as he let his oars fall in the water. "Look! They's two queer, big, round spots on it – big as plates."

Billy thought he saw the whole object move. He watched it closely. It *did* stir! It was some living thing, then. But what? A whale?

A long, snakelike arm was lifted out of the water. It swayed this way and that, darted here and there, and fell back with a splash. The moving spots, now plainly gigantic eyes, glittered.

"'Tis the devil-fish!" screamed Bobby.

Another arm was lifted up, then a third and a fourth and a fifth. The monster began to lash the water – faster and yet more furiously – until the tickle was heaving and frothy, and the whole neighbourhood was in an uproar.

"Pull! Pull!" cried Bobby.

Billy, too, was in a panic. They turned the head of the punt and pulled with all their might. The water swirled in the wake of the boat. Perceiving, however, that the squid made no effort to follow, they got the better of their fright. Then they lay on their oars to watch the monster.

They wondered why it still lay in the tickle, why it so furiously lashed the water with its arms and great tail. It was Bobby who solved the mystery.

"'Tis aground," said he.

That was evidently the situation. The squid had been caught in the shallow tickle when the tide, which ran swiftly at that point, was on the ebb. The boys took courage. Their curiosity still further emboldened them. So once more they turned the punt about and pulled cautiously towards the tickle.

There was less light than before, but still sufficient to disclose the baleful eyes and writhing arms of the squid when the boat was yet a safe distance away. One by one the arms fell back into the water, as if from exhaustion; slowly the beating of the tail subsided. After a time all sound and motion ceased. The boys waited for some further sign of life, but none came. The squid was still, as if dead.

"Sure, he's dead now," said Billy. "Leave us pull close up."

"Oh, no, b'y! He's but makin' believe."

But Billy thought otherwise. "I wants that squid," he said, in a dogged way, "and I'm goin' to have him. I'll sell him and get a new punt."

Bobby protested in vain. Nothing would content Billy Topsail but the possession of the big squid's body. Bobby pointed out that if the long, powerful arms were once laid on the boat there would be no escape. He recalled to Billy the harbour story of the horrible death of Zachariah North, who, as report said, had been pursued, captured and pulled under water by a devil-fish in Gander Bay.³

It was all to no purpose, however, for Billy obstinately declared that he would make sure of the squid before the tide turned. He admitted a slight risk, but he wanted a new punt, and he was willing to risk something to obtain it.

He proposed to put Bobby ashore, and approach the squid alone; but Bobby would not listen. Two hands might be needed in the boat, he said. What if the squid were alive, after all? What if it laid hold of the punt? In that event, two hands would surely be needed.

"I'll go," he said. "But leave us pull slow. And if we sees so much as a wink of his eye we'll pull away."

They rowed nearer, with great caution. Billy was in the bow of the boat. It was he who had the axe. Bobby, seated amidships, faced the bow. It was he who did the rowing.

The squid was quiet. There was not a sign of life about it. Billy estimated the length of its body, from the beak to the point of the tail, as twenty feet, the circumference as "the size of a hogshead." Its tentacular arms, he determined, must be at least thirty-five feet long; and when the boat came within that distance he shuddered.

"Is you sure he's dead?" Bobby whispered, weakly.

"I don't know!" Billy answered, in a gasp. "I thinks so."

Bobby dropped the oars and stepped to the bow of the punt. The boat lost way and came to a stop within twenty feet of the squid. Still there was no sign of life.

The boys stared at the great, still body, lying quiet in the gathering dusk and haze. Neither seemed to feel the slight trembling of the boat that might have warned them. Not a word was spoken until Billy, in a whisper, directed Bobby to pull the boat a few feet nearer.

"But we're movin' already," he added, in a puzzled way.

The boat was very slowly approaching the squid. The motion was hardly perceptible, but it was real.

"'Tis queer!" said Bobby.

He turned to take up the oars. What he saw lying over the port gunwale of the boat made him gasp, grip Billy's wrist and utter a scream of terror!

"We're cotched!"

The squid had fastened one of its tentacles to the punt. The other was poised above the stern, ready to fall and fix its suckers. The onward movement of the punt was explained.

Billy knew the danger, but he was not so terrified as to be incapable of action. He was about to spring to the stem to strike off the tentacle that already lay over the gunwale; but as he looked down to choose his step he saw that one of the eight powerful arms was slowly creeping over the starboard bow.

He struck at that arm with all his might, missed, wrenched the axe from the gunwale, and struck true. The mutilated arm was withdrawn. Billy leaped to the stern, vaguely conscious in passing that another arm was creeping from the water. He severed the first tentacle with one blow. When he turned to strike the second it had disappeared; so, too, had the second arm. The boat seemed to be free, but it was still within grasp.

³ Stories of this kind, of which there are many, are doubted by the authorities, who have found it impossible to authenticate a single instance of unprovoked attack.

In the meantime the squid had awakened to furious activity. It was lashing the water with arms and tail, angrily snapping its great beak and ejecting streams of black water from its siphon-tube. The water was violently agitated and covered with a black froth.

In this the creature manifested fear and distress. Had it not been aground it would have backed swiftly into the deep water of the basin. But, as if finding itself at bay, it lifted its uninjured tentacle high above the boat. Billy made ready to strike.

By this time Bobby had mastered his terror. While Billy stood with uplifted axe, his eyes fixed on the waving tentacle overhead, Billy heaved mightily on the oars. The boat slowly drew away from that highly dangerous neighbourhood. In a moment it was beyond reach of the arms, but still, apparently, within reach of the tentacle. The tentacle was withdrawn a short distance; then like a flash it shot towards the boat, writhing as it came.

Billy struck blindly – and struck nothing. The tentacle had fallen short. The boat was out of danger!

But still Billy Topsail was determined to have the body of the squid. Notwithstanding Bobby's pleading and protestation, he would not abandon his purpose. He was only the more grimly bent on achieving it. Bobby would not hear of again approaching nearer than the boat then floated, nor did Billy think it advisable. But it occurred to Bobby that they might land, and approach the squid from behind. If they could draw near enough, he said, they could cast the grapnel on the squid's back, and moor it to a tree ashore.

"Sure," he said, excitedly, "you can pick up a squid from behind, and it can't touch you with its arms! It won't be able to see us, and it won't be able to reach us."

So they landed. Billy carried the grapnel, which was attached to twelve fathoms of line. It had six prongs, and each prong was barbed.

A low cliff at the edge of the tickle favoured the plan. The squid lay below, and some twenty feet out from the rock. It was merely a question of whether or not Billy was strong enough to throw the grapnel so far. They tied the end of the line to a stout shrub. Billy cast the grapnel, and it was a strong, true cast. The iron fell fair on the squid's back. It was a capture.

"That means a new punt for me," said Billy, quietly. "The tide'll not carry *that* devil-fish away."

"And now," Bobby pleaded, "leave us make haste home, for 'tis growin' wonderful dark – and – and there might be another somewhere."

So that is how one of the largest specimens of *Architeuthis princeps*– enumerated in Prof. John Adam Wright's latest monograph on the cephalopods of North America as the "Chain Tickle specimen" – was captured. And that is how Billy Topsail fairly won a new punt; for when Doctor Marvey, the curator of the Public Museum at St. John's – who is deeply interested in the study of the giant squids – came to Ruddy Cove to make photographs and take measurements, in response to a message from Billy's father, he rewarded the lad.

CHAPTER V

On the Face of the Cliff: Wherein Billy Topsail Gets Lost in a Perilous Place and Sits Down to Recover His Composure

IN summer, when there chanced to be no fish, or when no bait was to be had, and the fish were not to be jigged, Billy Topsail had idle time, which he was not slow to improve for his own amusement. Often he wandered on the cliffs and heads near the harbour – not always for gulls' eggs: sometimes for sheer love of the sky and space and sunlit air. Once, being bound for Breakheart Head, to watch the waves beat on the rocks below, he came across old Arch Butt.

"Wonderful sea outside," said the old fisherman. "Wonderful sea, Billy. 'Tis as big a tumble as ever I seed stirred up in a night."

"An' you'll not be takin' the punt t' the grounds?" Billy asked, in surprise.

"I'm not able, lad. 'Tis too much for any paddle-punt. Sure, the sea's breakin' right across the tickle. 'Tis so much as a man's life is worth t' try t' run out."

"Isn't you got a salmon net off Shag Rock?"

"I is that," Arch answered; "an' I'm wantin' bad t' get to it. 'Tis set off the point of Shag Rock, an' I'm thinkin' the sea will wreck it, for 'tis a wonderful tumble, indeed. 'Tis like I'll not be able t' get out afore to-morrow mornin', but I'm hopin' I will."

"An' I hopes you may, Skipper Arch," said Billy.

It was a fine wish, born of the fresh breeze and brightness of the day – a word let drop from a heart full of good feeling for all the world: nothing more. Yet within a few hours Billy Topsail's life hung upon the possibility of its fulfillment.

"Ay," he repeated, "I hopes you may."

Billy Topsail followed the rocky road to the Bath Tub, climbed the Lookout, and descended the rough declivity beyond to the edge of the sea, meanwhile lifted to a joyous mood by the sunlight and wind and cloudless sky. Indeed, he was not sorry he had come; the grim cliffs and the jagged masses of rock lying at their feet – the thunder and froth where sea met rock – the breaking, flashing water to seaward; all this delighted him then, and were not soon forgotten. Best of all, the third submerged rock off Shag Cliff – the rock they call the Tombstone – was breaking; the greater waves there leaped into the air in fountains of froth.

"I 'low I'll get closer t' the Tombstone," thought he.

Thus he was led along the coast to the foot of Shag Cliff. It was a hard climb, in which hands and feet were both concerned. There were chasms to leap, sharp points to round, great rocks to scale, narrow ledges to pass over on the toes of his boots; and all the while the breakers were crashing and foaming below him, and now and again splashing him with spray.

Had the day been drear, it may be he would not have ventured so far; but the sun was out, the day long, the gulls quietly soaring over the sea, and on he went, giving no thought whatever to his return.

Once under the cliff, he ventured farther. Detached from it, there lies Nanny's Rock, which must long ago have fallen from above; the breakers surrounded but did not sweep it when they rose and broke.

His wish to lie there in the sunshine, with the blue sky above him and the noise of the water in his ears, led him to dash across the dripping space between when the wave fell back, even though he must scramble out of the way of the returning water.

In a few minutes he was deep in an enchanting day-dream, which, to his subsequent peril, soon changed to sleep.

The tide was rising. A few drops of spray, falling upon his face from a great breaker, awoke him. On the instant he was wide awake and looking desperately about. Then he laughed to think that

the breakers were reaching for him – that they would have had him fast in the trap had he slept much longer; for, in a glance, he thought he had made sure that his escape from the rock was not yet cut off. But his laugh was touched with some embarrassment when he found, upon trial, that the sea had blocked the path by which he had reached the foot of Shag Cliff.

"I must go 'tother way," he thought.

There was no other way; to right and to left the sea was breaking against overhanging juts of rock. He could pass from jut to jut, but he could round neither.

"Sure, I'll be late for dinner," he thought; "an' dad won't like it."

It was all very well to exclaim vexatiously, but he was forced to abandon the hope of returning by way of the foot of the cliffs. The tide had cut him off.

"I'll scale Shag Cliff," he determined.

He was not alarmed; the situation was awkward, but it promised the excitement of an adventure, and for a time he was rather glad that he had fallen asleep. To scale the two hundred feet of Shag Cliff – that was something to achieve! His father would say that he was "narvy," and forget that he had kept him from his dinner. Scale Shag Cliff, by all means!

He knew well enough that he had but to seek higher ground and wait for the tide to fall, if he wanted an unexciting return; but it pleased him to make believe that his situation was desperate – that the rising water would overwhelm him if he did not escape over the brow of the cliff: an indulgence which his imagination did not need half an hour later. When he looked up, however, to choose a path of ascent, he found that, from where he stood, close against the cliff at the base, there seemed to be no path at all.

"I 'low I'll have t' go back t' Nanny's Rock for a better squint," he told himself.

Back to Nanny's Rock he went, at no small risk, for the occasional flow of foam, which had cut it off from the mainland when first he crossed, had swollen to a strait of some depth and strength. He must make the leap, but he dreaded it. There was a moment of terror when his foot slipped, and he came near falling back into the very claws of the breaker which followed him; on that account, perhaps, his survey of the face of the cliff was a hurried one, and his return to safe ground precipitate and somewhat flurried.

He had seen enough, however, to persuade him that the ascent would be comparatively easy for at least a hundred feet, and that, for the rest of the way, it would not, probably, be much more difficult.

In point of fact, he knew nothing whatever of what lay beyond the first hundred feet. But the element of probability, or rather improbability, did not disconcert him. He could at least make a start.

If you have ever climbed about a rocky sea-coast, you will know that an ascent may be comparatively simple where a descent is quite impracticable; you will know that the unwary may of a sudden reach a point where to continue the climb is a nauseating necessity. There are times when one regrets the courage that led him into his difficulty – the courage or the carelessness, as the case may be.

Experience had long ago taught Billy Topsail that; but the lesson had not been severe – there had been no gulf behind him; the whip of life or death had not urged him on. Indeed, he had never attempted a climb of such height and ugly possibilities in the way of blind leads as Shag Cliff, else possibly he should not have made the start with a sense of adventure so inspiring.

Up he went – up and still up, his cheeks glowing, his nerves pleurably tingling! Up – up and still up, until he could hear the whiz of gulls' wings near him, and the feeling of space below began to try his nerves. At last he stopped to rest and look about. Down deep lay the breakers, so far off, it seemed, that he marvelled he could hear the roar and crash so distinctly.

"An' they says 'tis a hundred feet!" thought he. "Hut! 'Tis two hundred if 'tis an inch. An' I isn't but half way up!"

Beyond that point his difficulties began. The cliff was bolder; it was almost bare of those little ledges and crevices and projections upon which the cliff-climber depends for handhold and foothold.

Moreover, the path was interrupted from time to time by sheer or overhanging rock. When he came to these impassable places, of course, he turned to right or left, content with his progress if only he mounted higher and higher. Thus he strayed far off the path he had picked out from Nanny's Rock; indeed, he was climbing blindly, a thoughtless course, for – had he but stopped to think – there was no knowing that the cliff did not overhang at the end of the way he had taken.

Meanwhile, time was passing. He had climbed with such caution, retraced his steps, changed his course so often that noon was long past. So when next he came to a roomy ledge he sat down to rest before proceeding farther.

"Wonderful queer!" he thought, after a look about. "But where is I?"

It was a puzzling question. The cliff, projecting below him, cut off his view of the breakers; and the rock above, which came to an end in blue sky, was of course unfamiliar. At what part of Shag Rock he then was he could not tell.

CHAPTER VI

In Which Billy Topsail Loses His Nerve. Wherein, also, the Wings of Gulls Seem to Brush Past

"WONDERFUL queer!" thought Billy Topsail. "Lost on a cliff! 'Tis the queerest thing I ever knowed."

But that was Billy's case.

"I 'low," he concluded, at last, "that I'd better be goin' up instead o' down."

It did not appear that he would be unable to go down; the way up was the shorter way, that was all. Nevertheless, his feeling of security was pretty well shaken when he again began to climb. His grip was tighter, his shrinking from the depths stronger and more frequent; in fact, he hugged the rock more than was good for him.

He knew the symptom for an alarming one – it turned him faint when first he recognized it – and he tried to fix his attention upon the effort to climb higher. But now and again the fear of the space behind and below would creep in. Reason told him that the better part was to return; but he was in no condition to listen to reason. His whole desire – it was fast becoming frantic – was to crawl over the brow of the cliff and be safe.

But where was the brow of the cliff? It seemed to him that he had climbed a thousand feet.

A few minutes later he caught sight of a shrub; then he knew that he was within a few feet of the end of the climb. The shrub – a stunted spruce, which he had good reason to remember – was to his right, peeping round a projection of rock.

He was then on a ledge, with good foothold and good handhold; and a way of return to the shore lay open to him. By craning his neck he made out that if he could pass that projection he would reach shelving, broken rock, and be safe. Then he studied the face of the rocks between – a space of some six feet.

There was foothold there, midway, but he shrank from attempting to reach it. He had never thought in his life to try so perilous a passage. A survey of the course of a body falling from that point was almost more than he could support. Nevertheless, strange as it may seem, the waving shrub tempted him to risk something more to end his suspense. He summoned courage enough to stretch out his right foot and search with his right hand for a hold.

Unfortunately, he found both – a ledge for his foot and a crevice for his fingers.

He drew himself over. It took courage and strength, for it was a long stretch. Had he been cramped for room, had he not been free to move at the starting-point, he could not have managed it. But there he was – both feet on a ledge as wide as his feet were long, both hands with a comfortable grip on solid rock. He shuffled along until he came to the end of the ledge.

His last obstacle now lay before him. He must round the projection which divided him from the broken, shelving rock beyond. Had he foreseen the slightest difficulty he would not have gone so far. So, with confidence, he sought a foothold for his right foot – a crevice for the fingers of his right hand.

And he tried again, with confidence unshaken; again, with patience; again, with rising fear. There was no hold; the passage was impracticable. There was nothing for it but to return.

So he shuffled back to the other end of the ledge. Then, keenly regretting the necessity of return, he sought a foothold for his left foot – a crevice for the fingers of his left hand. He tried again, in some wonder; again, with a rush of fear; again, in abject terror.

To his horror, he found that he could not return. From the narrow ledge it was impossible to pass to the wider, although it had been possible to pass from the wider to the narrow. For an instant he was on the point of toppling back; but he let his body fall forward against the face of the cliff, and there he rested, gripping the rock with both hands until the faintness passed.

The situation was quite plain to him. He was standing on a ledge, as wide as his feet were long, some two or three hundred feet above the sea; his face was to the cliff, and he could neither sit down nor turn round. There he must stand until – who could tell? In what way could relief come to him? Who was to see? Who could hear his cries for help? No fishermen were on the grounds – no punts were out of the harbour; the sea was too high for that, as he had been told.

There was only one answer to his question. He must stand until – he fell.

"Yes," he was courageous enough to admit calmly, "I 'low I got t' go."

That once admitted, his terror of that space behind and below in some measure departed. The sun was still shining; the sky – as he knew, for he could catch a glimpse of it on each side – was still blue. But soon he began to think of the night; then his terror returned – not of the present moment, but of the hours of darkness approaching.

Could he endure until night? He thought not. His position was awkward. Surely his strength would wear out – his hands weaken, although the strain upon them was slight; his legs give way.

Of course he followed the natural impulse to cling to his life as long as he could. Thus, while the afternoon dragged along and the dusk approached, he stood on the face of the cliff, waiting for the moment when his weakening strength would fail and he would fall to his death.

"In an hour," he thought; soon it was, "In half an hour."

Before that last half-hour had passed he felt something brush past his back. It frightened him. What was it? Again he felt it. Again it startled and frightened him. Then he felt it no more for a time, and he was glad of that. He was too dull, perhaps, to dwell upon the mystery of that touch. It passed from his mind. Soon he felt it for the third time. Was it a wing? He wondered, too, if he had not heard a voice; for it seemed to him that some one had hailed him.

When next he heard the sound, he knew that his name had been called. He looked up. A rope was hanging over the brow of the cliff, sweeping slowly towards him. He could see it, although the light was failing. When it came near he extended his right hand behind him and caught it, then gave it a tug, in signal to those above that the search was ended. Painfully, slowly, for his situation was none too secure, he encircled his waist with that stout rope, lashed it fast, shouted, "Haul away!" and fainted.

When Billy Topsail came to his senses, it was to find himself lying on the moss, with old Arch, the skipper, leaning over him, and half a dozen fishermen gathered round.

"So you did get out to the salmon net?" he muttered.

"Aye," said Arch; "'twas I that seed you hangin' there. Sure, if I hadn't had my net set off Shag Rock, and if I hadn't got through the tickle to see if 'twas all right, and if – "

Billy shuddered.

CHAPTER VII

In Which Billy Topsail Hears the Fur Trader's Story of a Jigger and a Cake of Ice in the Wind

"WOULDN'T think I'd been born on Cherry Hill, would you, now?" said the man with the fur cap.

The stranger had been landed at Ruddy Cove from Fortune Harbour. He had been in the far north, he said; and he was now waiting for the mail-boat to take him south. Billy Topsail and the lads of Ruddy Cove cocked their ears for a yarn.

"Fact!" said he, with a nod. "That's where I was born and bred. And do you know how I come to be away up here? No? Well, I'm a fur trader. I'm the man that bought the skin of that silver fox last winter for thirty dollars and sold it for two hundred and fifty. I'd rather be the man that bought it from me and sold it in London for six hundred. But I'm not."

"And you're bound for home, now?" the old skipper asked.

"Yes," he drawled. "I'm bound home for New York to see the folks. I've been away six years, and came nearer to leaving my bones up here in the north last spring than ever I did before. I've done some travelling in my time. You can take me at my word; I have."

The trader laughed uproariously. He was in a voluble mood. The old skipper knew that he needed but little encouragement to tell the story of his escape.

"It makes me think about that old riddle of the corked bottle," he said. "Ever hear it? This is it: If you had a bottle of ginger ale, how would you get the stuff out without breaking the bottle or drawing the cork? Can you answer that?"

"The answer doesn't strike me," said the skipper.

"That's just it," the trader burst out. "The way to do it doesn't 'strike you.' But if you had the bottle in your hands now and wanted the ginger ale, it would 'strike' you fast enough to push the cork in. Well, that was my case. You think of yourself on a little pan of ice, drifting straight out to sea with a strong offshore wind, water all round you and no paddle – just think of yourself in that case, and a way of getting ashore might not 'strike' you. But once you're there – once you're right on that pan of ice, with the hand of death on your collar – you'll think like lightning of all the things you can do. Yes, that was my case."

The listeners said nothing to interrupt the stocky, hard-featured, ill-clad little man while he mused.

"Don't you be fool enough to try to cross the bay this evening,' says I to myself," he went on.

"But I'm a hundred-mile man, and I'd gone my hundred miles. I can carry grub on my back to last me just that far; and my grub was out. From what I knew of winds and ice, I judged that the ice would be four or five miles out to sea by dawn of the next day. So I didn't start out with the idea that the trip would be as easy as a promenade over Brooklyn Bridge of a moonlight night. Oh, no! I knew what I was doing. But it was a question of taking the risk or dragging myself into the settlement at Racquet Harbour in three days' time as lean as a car-horse from starvation. You see, it was forty miles round that bay and four across; and – my grub was out. Many a man loses his life in these parts by looking at the question in just that way.

"Oh, no!' says I to myself. 'You'd much better take your chance of starving, and walk round.'

"It wasn't in human nature, though, to do it. Not when I knew that there was grub and a warm fire waiting for me at Racquet Harbour. Says I, 'I'll take the long chance and stand to win.' Don't you run away with the idea that the ice was a level field stretching from shore to shore, fitting the rocks, and kept as neat as a baseball diamond. It wasn't. Some day in the winter the wind had jammed the bay full of big rough chunks – they call them pans in this country – and the frost had stuck them all together. When the spring came, of course the sun began to melt that glue, and the whole floe was

just ready to fall apart when I had the bad luck to make the coast. I was a day too late. I knew it. And I knew that the offshore wind would sweep the ice to sea the minute it broke up.

"I made the first hundred yards in ten minutes; the second in fifteen more. In half an hour I'd made half a mile. The ice was rough enough and flimsy enough to take the nerve out of any man. But that wasn't the worst; the worst was that there were hundreds of holes covered with a thin crust of snow – all right to look at, but treacherous. I knew that if I made the mistake of stepping on a crust instead of solid ice, I'd go through and down.

"I had four otter skins, some martens and ten fine fox skins in the pack on my back. To do anything in the water with that handicap was too much for me. So I wasn't at all particular about making time until I found that the night would catch me if I didn't wag along a little faster.

"No, sir!" the trader said. "I didn't want to be caught out there in the dark.

"By good luck, I struck some big pans about half-way over. Then I took to a dog-trot, and left the yards behind me in a way that cheered me up. Just before dusk I got near enough to the other side to feel proud of myself, and I began to think of what a fool I'd have been if I'd taken the shore route. A minute later I changed my mind. I felt the pack moving! Well, in a flash I said good-bye to Cherry Hill and the boys. Not many men are caught twice in a place like that. They never have the second chance.

"There I was, aboard a rotten floe and bound out to the big, lonely ocean at the rate of four miles an hour.

"Oh, you might as well get ready to go, Jim,' thinks I. But I didn't give up. I loped along shoreward in a way that didn't take snow crust or air-holes into account. And I made the edge of the floe before the black hours of the night had come.

"There was a couple of hundred yards of cold water between me and the shore.

"This is the time you think more of your life than your fur,' thinks I.

"There was a stray pan or two – little rafts of things – lying off the edge of the floe; and beyond them, scattered between the shore and me, half a dozen other pans were floating. How to get from one to the other was the puzzle. They were fifty or sixty yards apart, most of them, and I had no paddle. It was foolish to think of making a shift with my jacket for a sail; the wind was out, not in, and I had no rudder.

"What had I? Nothing that I could think of. It didn't *strike* me, as you say. I wish it had.

"Anyhow,' says I to myself, 'I'll get as far as I can.'

"It was a short leap from the floe to the first pan. I made it easily. The second pan was farther off, but I thought I could jump the water between. So I took off my pack and threw it on the ice beside me. It almost broke my heart to do it, for I'd walked five hundred miles in the dead of winter for that fur; I'd been nearly starved and frozen, and I'd paid out hard-earned money. I put down my pack, took a short run, and jumped like a stag for the second pan.

"I landed on the spot I'd picked out. I can't complain of missing the mark, but instead of stopping there, I shot clear through and down into the water.

"Surprised? I was worse than that. I was dead scared. For a minute I thought I was going to rise under the ice and drown right there.

"How it happened I don't know; but I came up between the pans, and struck out for the one I'd left. I got to the pan, all right, and climbed aboard. There I was, on a little pan of ice, beyond reach of the floe and leaving the shore behind me, and cold and pretty well discouraged.

"There's the riddle of the corked bottle," said the trader, interrupting his narrative. "Now how do I happen to be sitting here?"

"I'm sure I can't tell," said the skipper.

"No more you should," said he, "for you don't know what I carried in my pack. But you see I had the bottle in my hands, and I wanted the ginger ale bad; so I thought fast and hard.

"It struck me that I might do something with my line and jigger.⁴ Don't you see the chance the barbed steel hooks and the forty fathom of line gave me? When I thought of that jigger I felt just like the man who is told to push the cork in when he can't draw it out. I'd got back to the pan where I'd thrown down my pack, you know; so there was the jigger, right at hand.

"It was getting dark by this time – getting dark fast, and the pans were drifting farther and farther apart.

"It was easy to hook the jigger in the nearest pan and draw my pan over to it; for that pan was five times the weight of the one I was on. The one beyond was about the same size; they came together at the half-way point. Of course this took time. I could hardly see the shore then, and it struck me that I might not be able to find it at all, when I came near enough to cast my jigger for it.

"About fifty yards off was a big pan. I swung the jigger round and round and suddenly let the line shoot through my fingers. When I hauled it in the jigger came too, for it hadn't taken hold. That made me feel bad. I felt worse when it came back the second time. But I'm not one of the kind that gives up. I kept right on casting that jigger until it landed in the right spot.

"My pan crossed over as I hauled in the line. That was all right; but there was no pan between me and the shore.

"All up!" thinks I.

"It was dark. I could see neither pan nor shore. Before long I couldn't see a thing in the pitchy blackness.

"All the time I could feel the pan humping along towards the open sea. I didn't know how far off the shore was. I was in doubt about just where it was.

"Is this pan turning round?" thinks I. Well, I couldn't tell; but I thought I'd take a flier at hooking a rock or a tree with the jigger.

"The jigger didn't take hold. I tried a dozen times, and every time I heard it splash the water. But I kept on trying – and would have kept on till morning if I'd needed to. You can take me at my word, I'm not the kind of fool that gives up – I've been in too many tight places for that. So, at last, I gave the jigger a fling that landed it somewhere where it held fast; but whether ice or shore I couldn't tell. If shore, all right; if ice, all wrong; and that's all I could do about it.

"Now," thinks I, as I began to haul in, 'it all depends on the fishing line. Will it break, or won't it?'

"It didn't. So the next morning, with my pack on my back, I tramped round the point to Racquet Harbour."

"What was it?" was Billy Topsail's foolish question. "Shore or ice?"

"If it hadn't been shore," said the trader, "I wouldn't be here."

⁴ A jigger is a lead fish, about three inches long, which spreads into two large barbed hooks at one end; the other end is attached to about forty fathoms of stout line. Jiggers are used to jerk fish from the water where there is no bait.

CHAPTER VIII

In the Offshore Gale: In Which Billy Topsail Goes Seal Hunting and is Swept to Sea With the Floe

WHAT befell old Tom Topsail and his crew came in the course of the day's work. Fishermen and seal-hunters, such as the folk of Ruddy Cove, may not wait for favourable weather; when the fish are running, they must fish; when the seals are on the drift-ice offshore in the spring, they must hunt.

So on that lowering day, when the seals were sighted by the watch on Lookout Head, it was a mere matter of course that the men of the place should set out to the hunt.

"I s'pose," Tom Topsail drawled, "that we'd best get under way."

Bill Watt, his mate, scanned the sky in the northeast. It was heavy, cold and leaden; fluffy gray towards the zenith, and black where the clouds met the barren hills.

"I s'pose," said he, catching Topsail's drawl, "that 'twill snow afore long."

"Oh, aye," was the slow reply, "I s'pose 'twill."

Again Bill Watt faced the sullen sky. He felt that the supreme danger threatened – snow with wind.

"I s'pose," he said, "that 'twill blow, too."

"Oh, aye," Topsail replied, indifferently, "snow 'n' blow. We'll know what 'twill do when it begins," he added. "Billy, b'y!" he shouted.

In response Billy Topsail came bounding down the rocky path from the cottage. He was stout for his age, with broad shoulders, long thick arms and large hands. There was a boy's flush of expectation on his face, and the flash of a boy's delight in his eyes. He was willing for adventure.

"Bill an' me'll take the rodney," Topsail drawled. "I s'pose you might's well fetch the punt, an' we'll send you back with the first haul."

"Hooray!" cried Billy; and with that he waved his cap and sped back up the hill.

"Fetch your gaff, lad!" Topsail called after him. "Make haste! There's Joshua Rideout with his sail up. 'Tis time we was off."

"Looks more'n ever like snow," Bill Watt observed, while they waited. "I'm thinkin' 'twill snow."

"Oh, maybe 'twon't," said Topsail, optimistic in a lazy way.

The ice-floe was two miles or more off the coast; thence it stretched to the horizon – a vast, rough, blinding white field, formed of detached fragments. Some of the "pans" were acres in size; others were not big enough to bear the weight of a man; all were floating free, rising and falling with the ground swell.

The wind was light, the sea quiet, the sky thinly overcast. Had it not been for the threat of heavy weather in the northeast, it would have been an ideal day for the hunt. The punt and the rodney, the latter far in the lead, ran quietly out from the harbour, with their little sails all spread. From the punt Billy Topsail could soon see the small, scattered pack of seals – black dots against the white of the ice.

When the rodney made the field, the punts of the harbour fleet had disappeared in the winding lanes of open water that led through the floe. Tom Topsail was late. The nearer seals were all marked by the hunters who had already landed. The rodney would have to be taken farther in than the most venturesome hunter had yet dared to go – perilously far into the midst of the shifting pans.

The risk of sudden wind – the risk that the heavy fragments would "pack" and "nip" the boat – had to be taken if seals were to be killed.

"We got to go right in, Bill," said Topsail, as he furled the rodney's sails.

"I s'pose," was Watt's reply, with a backward glance to the northeast. "An' Billy?"

"'Tis not wise to take un in," Topsail answered, hastily. "We'll have un bide here."

Billy was hailed, and, to his great disappointment, warned to keep beyond the edge of the floe. Then the rodney shot into the lane, with Topsail and Bill Watt rowing like mad. She was soon lost to sight. Billy shipped his sail and paddled to the edge of the ice, to wait, as patiently as might be, for the reappearance of the rodney.

Patience soon gave way to impatience, impatience to anxiety, anxiety to great fear for the lives of his father and the mate, for the offshore gale was driving up; the blue-black clouds were already high and rising swiftly.

At last there came an ominous puff of wind. It swept over the sea from the coast, whipping up little waves in its course – frothy little waves, that hissed. Heavy flakes of snow began to fall. As the wind rose they fell faster, and came driving, swirling with it.

With the fall of the first flakes the harbour fleet came pell-mell from the floe. Not a man among them but wished himself in a sheltered place. Sails were raised in haste, warnings were shouted; then off went the boats, beating up to harbour with all sail set.

"Make sail, lad!" old Elisha Bull shouted to Billy, as his punt swung past.

Billy shook his head. "I'll beat back with father!" he cried.

"You'll lose yourself!" Elisha screamed, as a last warning, before his punt carried him out of hail.

But Billy still hung at the edge of the ice. His father had said, "Bide here till we come out," and "bide" there he would.

He kept watch for the rodney, but no rodney came. Minute after minute flew by. He hesitated. Was it not his duty to beat home? There was still the fair chance that he might be able to make the harbour. Did he not owe a duty to his mother – to himself?

But a crashing noise from the floe brought him instantly to a decision. He knew what that noise meant. The ice was feeling the force of the wind. It would pack and move out to sea. The lane by which the rodney had entered then slowly closed.

In horror Billy watched the great pans swing together. There was now no escape for the boat. The strong probability was that she would be crushed to splinters by the crowding of the ice; that indeed she had already been crushed; that the men were either drowned or cast away on the floe.

At once the lad's duty was plain to him. He must stay where he was. If his father and Bill Watt managed to get to the edge of the ice afoot, who else was to take them off?

The ice was moving out to sea, Billy knew. The pans were crunching, grinding, ever more noisily. But he let the punt drift as near as he dared, and so followed the pack towards the open, keeping watch, ever more hopelessly, for the black forms of the two men.

Soon, so fast did the sea rise, so wild was the wind, his own danger was very great. The ice was like a rocky shore to leeward. He began to fear that he would be wrecked.

Time and again the punt was nearly swamped, but Billy dared not drop the oars to bail. There was something more. His arms, stout and seasoned though they were, were giving out. It would not long be possible to keep the boat off the ice. He determined to land on the floe.

But the sea was breaking on the ice dead to leeward. It was impossible to make a landing there, so with great caution he paddled to the right, seeking a projecting point, behind which he might find shelter. At last he came to a cove. It narrowed to a long, winding arm, which apparently extended some distance into the floe.

There he found quiet water. He landed without difficulty at a point where the arm was no more than a few yards wide. Dusk was then approaching. The wind was bitterly cold, and the snow was thick and blinding.

It would not be safe, he knew, to leave the boat in the water, for at any moment the shifting pans might close and crush it. He tried to lift it out of the water, but his strength was not sufficient. He managed to get the bow on the ice; that was all.

"I'll just have to leave it," he thought. "I'll just have to trust that 'twill not be nipped."

Near by there was a hummock of ice. He sought the lee of it, and there, protected from the wind, he sat down to wait.

Often, when the men were spinning yarns in the cottages of Ruddy Cove of a winter night, he had listened, open-mouthed, to the tales of seal-hunters who had been cast away. Now he was himself drifting out to sea. He had no fire, no food, no shelter but a hummock of ice. He had the bitterness of the night to pass through – the hunger of to-morrow to face.

"But sure," he muttered, with characteristic hopefulness, "I've a boat, an' many a man has been cast away without one."

He thought he had better make another effort to haul the boat on the ice. Some movement of the pack might close the arm where it floated. So he stumbled towards the place.

He stared round in amazement and alarm; then he uttered a cry of terror. The open water had disappeared.

"She's been nipped!" he sobbed. "She's been nipped – nipped to splinters! I've lost meself!"

Night came fast. An hour before, so dense was the storm, nothing had been visible sixty paces away; now nothing was to be seen anywhere. Where was the rodney? Had his father and Bill Watt escaped from the floe by some new opening? Were they safe at home? Were they still on the floe? He called their names. The swish of the storm, the cracking and crunching of the ice as the wind swept it on – that was all that he heard.

For a long time he sat in dull despair. He hoped no longer.

By and by, when it was deep night, something occurred to distract him. He caught sight of a crimson glow, flaring and fading. It seemed to be in the sky, now far off, now near at hand. He started up.

"What's that?" he muttered.

CHAPTER IX

In Which Old Tom Topsail Burns His Punt and Billy Wanders in the Night and Three Lives Hang on a Change of the Wind

MEANWHILE, under the powerful strokes of old Tom Topsail and Bill Watt, the rodney had followed the open leads into the heart of the floe. From time to time Watt muttered a warning; but the spirit of the hunt fully possessed Tom, and his only cry was, "Push on! Push on!"

Seal after seal escaped, while the sky darkened. He was only the more determined not to go back empty-handed.

"I tells you," Watt objected, "we'll not get out. There's the wind now. And snow, man – snow!"

The warning was not to be disregarded. Topsail thought no more about seals. The storm was fairly upon them. His only concern was to escape from the floe. He was glad, indeed, that Billy had not followed them. He had that, at least, to be thankful for.

They turned the boat. Bending to the oars, they followed the lane by which they had entered. Confusion came with the wind and the snow. The lay of the pans seemed to have changed. It was changing every moment, as they perceived.

"Tom," gasped Watt, at last, "we're caught! 'Tis a blind lead we're in."

That was true; the lane had closed. They must seek another exit. So they turned the boat and followed the next lane that opened. It, too, was blocked.

They tried another, selected at random. In that blinding storm no choice was possible. Again disappointment; the lane narrowed to a point. They were nearly exhausted now, but they turned instantly to seek another way. That way was not to be found. The lane had closed behind them.

"Trapped!" muttered Watt.

"Aye, lad," Topsail said, solemnly, "trapped!"

They rested on their oars. Ice was on every hand. They stared into each other's eyes.

Then, for the second time, Watt ran his glance over the shores of the lake in which they floated. He started, then pointed in the direction from which they had come. Topsail needed no word of explanation. The ice was closing in. The pressure of the pack beyond would soon obliterate the lake. They rowed desperately for the nearest shore.

The ice was rapidly closing in. In such cases, as they knew, it often closed with a sudden rush at the end, crushing some pan which for a moment had held it in check.

When the boat struck the ice Watt jumped ashore with the painter. Topsail, leaping from seat to seat, followed instantly. At that moment there was a loud crack, like a clap of thunder. It was followed by a crunching noise.

"It's comin'!" screamed Topsail.

"Heave away!"

They caught the bow, lifted it out of the water, and with a united effort slowly hauled it out of harm's way. A moment later there was no sign of open water.

"Thank God!" gasped Topsail.

By this time the storm was a blizzard. The men had no shelter, and they were afraid to venture far from the boat in search of it. Neither would permit the other to stumble over the rough ice, chancing its pitfalls, for neither cared to be lost from the other.

Now they sat silent in the lee of the upturned boat, with the snow swirling about them; again they ran madly back and forth; yet again they swung their arms and stamped their feet. At last, do what they would, they shivered all the time. Then they sat quietly down.

"I'm wonderful glad Billy is safe home," Watt observed.

"I wisht I was sure o' that," said Topsail. "It looks bad for us, Bill, lad. The ice is drivin' out fast, an' I'm thinkin' 'twill blow steady for a day. It looks wonderful bad for us, an' I'd feel – easier in me mind – about the lad's mother – if I knowed he was safe home."

Late in the night Topsail turned to Watt. He had to nudge him to get his attention. "It's awful cold, Bill," he said. "We got the boat, lad. Eh? We got the boat."

"No, no, Tom! Not yet! We'd be sure doomed without the boat."

Half an hour passed. Again Topsail roused Watt.

"We're doomed if we don't," he said. "We can't stand it till mornin', lad. We can't wait no longer."

Watt blundered to his feet. Without a word he fumbled in the snow until he found what he sought. It was the axe. He handed it to Topsail.

"Do it, Tom!" he said, thickly. "I'm near gone."

Topsail attacked the boat. It was like murder, he thought. He struck blow after blow, blindly, viciously; gathered the splinters, made a little heap of them and set them afire. The fire blazed brightly. Soon it was roaring. The ice all around was lighted up. Above, the snow reflected the lurid glow.

Warmth and a cheerful light put life in the men. They crept as close to the fire as they could. Reason would shut out hope altogether, but hope came to them. Might not the storm abate? Might not the wind change? Might not they be picked up? In this strain they talked for a long time; and meanwhile they added the fuel, splinter by splinter.

"Father! 'Tis *you!*"

Topsail leaped to his feet and stared.

"'Tis Billy!" cried Watt.

Billy staggered into the circle of light. He stared stupidly at the fire. Then he tottered a step or two nearer, and stood swaying; and again he stared at the fire in a stupid way.

"I seed the fire!" he mumbled. "The punt's nipped, sir – an' I seed the fire – an' crawled over the ice. 'Twas hard to find you."

Tom Topsail and Bill Watt understood. They, too, had travelled rough ice in a blizzard, and they understood.

Billy was wet to the waist. That meant that, blinded by the snow or deceived by the night, he had slipped through some opening in the ice, some crack or hole. The bare thought of that lonely peril was enough to make the older men shudder. But they asked him no questions. They led him to the fire, prodigally replenished it, and sat him down between them. By and by he was so far recovered that he was able to support his father's argument that the wind had not changed.

"Oh, well," replied Watt, doggedly, "you can say what you likes; but I tells you that the wind's veered to the south. 'Twould not surprise me if the pack was drivin' Cape Wonder way."

"No, no, Bill," said Topsail sadly; "there's been no change. We're drivin' straight out. When the wind drops the pack'll go to pieces, an' then – "

Thus the argument was continued, intermittently, until near dawn. Of a sudden, then, they heard a low, far-off rumble. It was a significant, terrifying noise. It ran towards them, increasing in volume. It was like the bumping that runs through a freight-train when the engine comes to a sudden stop.

The pack trembled. There was then a fearful confusion of grinding, crashing sounds. Everywhere the ice was heaving and turning. The smaller pans were crushed; many of the greater ones were forced on end; some were lifted bodily out of the water, and fell back in fragments, broken by their own weight. On all sides were noise and awful upheaval. The great pan upon which the seal-hunters had landed was tipped up – up – up – until it was like the side of a steep hill. There it rested. Then came silence.

Bill Watt was right: the wind had changed; the pack had grounded on Cape Wonder. The three men from Ruddy Cove walked ashore in the morning.

Billy was the first to run up to the house. He went through the door like a gale of wind.

"We're safe, mother!" he shouted.

"I'm glad, dear," said his mother, quietly. "Breakfast is ready."

When Billy was older he learned the trick his mother had long ago mastered – to betray no excitement, whatever the situation.

CHAPTER X

How Billy Topsail's Friend Bobby Lot Joined Fortunes With Eli Zitt and Whether or Not he Proved Worthy of the Partnership

RUDDY COVE called Eli Zitt a "hard" man. In Newfoundland, that means "hardy" – not "bad." Eli was gruff-voiced, lowering-eyed, unkempt, big; he could swim with the dogs, outdare all the reckless spirits of the Cove with the punt in a gale, bare his broad breast to the winter winds, travel the ice wet or dry, shoulder a barrel of flour; he was a sturdy, fearless giant, was Eli Zitt, of Ruddy Cove. And for this the Cove very properly called him a "hard" man.

When Josiah Lot, his partner, put out to sea and never came back – an offshore gale had the guilt of that deed – Eli scowled more than ever and said a deal less.

"He'll be feelin' bad about Josiah," said the Cove.

Which may have been true. However, Eli took care of Josiah's widow and son. The son was Bobby Lot, with whom, subsequently, Billy Topsail shared the adventure of the giant squid of Chain Tickle. The Cove laughed with delight to observe Eli Zitt's attachment to the lad. The big fellow seemed to be quite unable to pass the child without patting him on the back; and sometimes, so exuberant was his affection, the pats were of such a character that Bobby lost his breath. Whereupon, Eli would chuckle the harder, mutter odd endearments, and stride off on his way.

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