

## THE GREAT SEA SERPENT

There was once a little sea fish of good family, the name I can't recall, you must get the pundits to tell you it. The little fish had eighteen hundred brothers and sisters, all of the same age; they did not know their father or mother, they immediately had to fend for themselves and swim about, but that was a great pleasure – they had plenty of water to drink, the entire ocean, they did not have to think about food, it turned up of its own accord; each one of them could do as it liked, each one would get its own life story, and none of them gave that a thought either.

The sun shone down into the water, it gleamed around them, it was so clear, it was a world with the most remarkable creatures, and some of them were so fearsomely large, with huge jaws, they could swallow the eighteen hundred brothers and sisters, but they didn't think about that either, for none of them had been swallowed yet.

The small fish all swam together, close up to each other, like herrings and mackerel swim; but at the very moment when they were swimming in the water and not thinking about anything at all, there sank, with a terrible sound, from above them and down into the midst of them, a long, heavy thing that simply refused to stop; further and further it stretched, and each of the small fish that it struck was squashed or given a blow from which it could not recover. All the small fish, and the big ones too, from the surface of the sea right down to the sea bed, shot sideways in terror; the heavy, violent thing sank deeper and deeper, it got longer and longer, miles long, through all of the sea.

Fish and sea snails, everything that swims, everything that crawls or is borne by the sea currents, perceived this terrible thing, this enormous, unknown conger eel that had suddenly descended from above.

What could this thing possibly be? Well, we know the answer! It was the many-miles-long telegraph cable humans were laying down between Europe and America.

There was a fright, a great commotion among all the rightful inhabitants of the ocean where the cable was being laid. The flying fish skimmed over the sea's surface as high as they could, yes and the gurnard shot off like a rifle bullet across the water, for it's able to do that; other fish made for the sea bed, darting down at such speed that they arrived long before the telegraph cable was seen down there; they scared both the cod and flatfish that were peacefully at work in the depths eating their fellow creatures.

A couple of sea slugs were given such a fright that they spewed out the contents of their stomachs, but went on living, for they were able to do that. Many lobsters and edible crabs jumped out of their armour casing and had to leave their legs behind.

In the midst of all this fright and confusion, the eighteen hundred brothers and sisters got separated from each other, and did not meet again, or didn't recognise each other – only half a score or so were left on the same spot, and after having stayed motionless for a couple of hours, the first shock subsided and they began to get curious.

They looked around, they looked up and they looked down, and there in the depths they thought they could glimpse the terrible thing that had scared them, scared them great and small. The thing was lying across the sea bed, as far as the eye could see; it was very thin, but they did not know of course just how much it could swell up, or how strong it was. It lay there quite still, but, they thought, that could be a cunning plan.

'Let it lie where it is! It's none of our concern!' the most cautious of the small fish said, but the smallest of them refused to give up the idea of getting to know what the thing might be; it had come down from above, so one could best find out from up there, and so they swam up to the surface – the weather was dead calm.

There they met a dolphin – it was such a leaper, a sea-skimmer that can do somersaults along the surface of the sea; it has eyes to see with, and it must have seen and know something; they asked it, but all it had thought about was itself and its somersaults, not seen anything, didn't know what to answer, and so it remained silent and looked proud instead.

Then they turned to the seal that was about to dive down; it was more polite, despite the fact that it ate small fish; but today it had eaten its fill. It knew a bit more than the leaping fish.

'Many a night I have lain on a wet rock and looked in towards the shore, many miles from here; there are cunning creatures there which in their language are called human beings, they pursue us, but we nearly always manage to escape from them I understand, and that the conger eel you are asking about has also done. It has been in their power, been up on dry land, probably for ages and ages; from there they have transported it on a vessel to bring it across the sea to another distant country. I could see what trouble they were having with it, but they managed to cope with it, for it had become weak on dry land. They arranged it in coils and rings, I could hear how it wriggled and squiggled when they did so, but it managed to escape from them, escape out here. They held onto it with all their might, many hands held on tight, it slipped from their grasp however and reached the sea bed; it's lying down there, I think, for the time being!'

'It's a bit thin!' the small fish said.

'They have starved it!' the seal said, 'but it will soon recover, regain its former thickness and greatness. I assume that it is the great sea serpent that humans are so afraid of and talk so much about; I had never seen it before and never believed in it; now I do, *that's* what it is!' and the seal dived down.

'How much he know! What a lot he said!' the small fish said. 'I have never been so wise before! – Unless all of it is just a lie!'

'We could always swim down and investigate!' the smallest one said; 'on our way we can hear what the others think about it!'

'I'm not taking a fin-stroke to find out anything!' the others said, and turned away.

'But I'm going to!' the smallest one said and set off down into the deep water, but it was a long way away from the place where 'the long, laid-down thing' lay. The little fish looked and search everywhere on its way down into the depths.

Never before had it sensed that the world was so large. The herrings moved in large shoals, gleaming like a huge boat of silver, the mackerels also moved together and looked even more magnificent. Fish came by in all shapes and sizes and with markings in every colour; medusas, like half-translucent flowers, that let themselves be carried along by the currents. Large plants grew up from the sea bed, grass a fathom tall and palm-shaped trees, each leaf studded with glittering shellfish.

Finally, the little sea fish caught sight of a long, dark streak down there and navigated towards it, but it was neither fish nor cable, it was the railing of a large sunken vessel, the upper and lower deck of which had been broken by the pressure of the sea. The little fish swam into the room where the many humans who had died when the ship sunk had now been flushed away, except for two: a young woman lay stretched out there with a young child in her arms. The water lifted them and almost rocked them – they seemed as if asleep. The little fish felt very frightened, it did not know if they could wake up again or not. Water plants hung like foliage over the railing, over the two beautiful corpses of the mother and child. They were so still; it was so lonely there. The little fish hurried away as fast as it could, out to where the water was more clearly lit and where other fish could be seen. It hadn't gone very far before it met up with a young whale that was so terribly big.

‘Don’t swallow me!’ the little fish said. ‘I’m not even enough to taste, I’m that small, and I find being alive such a pleasure!’

‘What do you want down here in the depths where your species doesn’t come?’ the whale asked. And then the little fish told it all about the mysterious eel, or whatever the thing happened to be, that had sunk down from above and frightened even the most courageous of sea creatures.

‘Ho, ho!’ the whale said and sucked in such a vast amount of water that it had to spout a great cascade from its blowhole when it came to the surface to breathe. ‘Ho, ho!’ it said, ‘so that was the thing that tickled my back as I was turning round! I thought it was a ship’s mast that I could use as a scratching stick! But it wasn’t here it happened. No, the thing lies much further out. I’ll go and take a look though, since I’ve nothing better to do!’

And it swam ahead, with the little fish after it, not too close, for there was a kind of sucking current where the huge whale had made good headway through the water.

They met a shark and an old swordfish; both of them had heard about the strange conger eel, so long and so thin; though they hadn’t seen it, but they wanted to.

Now a catfish appeared on the scene.

‘I’ll come along too!’ it said, it was going the same way.

‘If the great sea serpent’s no thicker than an anchor cable, I’ll bite through it at one go!’ and it opened its jaws and displayed its six rows of teeth. ‘I can leave my mark on a ship’s anchor, so I can certainly bite through that stem!’

‘There it is!’ the huge whale said, ‘I can see it!’ He believed he could see better than the others. ‘Look at how it lifts itself up, look at how it sways, twists and turns!’

It wasn’t the serpent though, but an extremely large conger eel, several yards long, that was approaching them.

‘I’ve seen that one before!’ the swordfish said, ‘it’s never caused a great commotion in the sea, or frightened any big fish!’

And then they spoke to it about the new eel and asked if it wanted to join in their exploration.

‘If that eel is longer than me!’ the conger eel said, ‘it’s in for big trouble!’

‘Indeed it is!’ the others said. ‘There are enough of us not to have to put up with it!’ and they hurried on.

But then something blocked their path, a strange monster, bigger than all of them put together.

It looked like a swimming island that was unable to keep itself afloat.

It was an ancient whale. Its head was overgrown with sea plants, its back covered with crawling creatures and such a vast number of oysters and mussels that its black skin was simply blotched with white patches.

‘Come on, old man!’ they said. ‘A new fish has arrived that can’t be put up with.’

‘I’d rather lie where I’m lying right now!’ the old whale said. ‘Leave me in peace! Let me lie here! Oh, deary dear! I suffer from a serious disease! I get relief by rising to the surface and sticking my back out of the water! Then the large, kind seabirds come and peel everything off, it feels so good, as long as they don’t stick their beaks too far in, they often go straight into my blubber. Just look! I’ve got the entire skeleton of a bird still sitting in my back; it latched on too deeply with its claws and couldn’t free itself when I dived to the sea bed. Now the small fish have peeled it instead. Just look at what it looks like and I look like. I’ve a serious illness!’

‘It’s just imagination!’ the shark said. ‘I’m never ill. No fish is ever ill!’

‘Excuse me for disagreeing!’ the old whale said, ‘the eel has a skin disease, the carp is said to have smallpox, and all of us have worms in our intestines!’

‘Rubbish!’ the shark said, he refused to listen to anything more, nor did the others, they had other business to attend to. Finally they arrived at the place where the telegraph cable lay. It has a long path on the sea bed from Europe to America, across sand banks and silts, rocky ground and great tangles of plants, whole forests of coral, and the currents shift down there, eddies spin, fish teem, in greater shoals than the innumerable flocks of birds humans see when they migrate. There is a commotion, a splashing, a humming, a roaring – there is a still a little of that roaring haunting the large, empty conches when we hold them up to our ear.

Now they came to the spot.

‘There the beast lies!’ the large fish said, and the little one said it too. They saw the cable, the beginning and end of which lay outside their vision.

Sponges, polyps and gorgons swayed from the sea bed, sinking and bending over it, so that it was now concealed, now difficult to see. Sea urchins, sea snails and worms moved around it; huge spiders that had a whole crew of shellfish on board, strutted along the cable. Dark-blue sea slugs, or whatever the crawling creatures are called, they eat with their entire body, seemed to lie there sniffing at the new animal that had lain down on the sea bed.

Flatfish and cod turned round in the water to listen from every direction. The starfish, which always bores its way down into the silt and only has two long stalks with eyes up above, lay there staring to see what would come out of all this commotion.

The telegraph cable lay there, motionless. But there was life and thought inside it – human thoughts passed through it.

‘That thing is treacherous!’ the whale said. ‘It is capable of striking me on the stomach, and that happens to be my sensitive part!’

‘Let’s try and feel it over!’ the polyp said. ‘I’ve got long tentacles, I’ve got supple fingers! I’ve already touched it, now I take a bit harder grip.’

And it stretched out its supple, longest tentacles down to the cable and round it.

‘It’s got no scales!’ the polyp said, ‘it’s got no skin! I don’t believe it will ever give birth to live offspring!’

The conger eel lay down beside the telegraph cable and stretches itself out as far as it could.

‘This thing is longer than I am!’ it said. ‘But length isn’t everything, one’s got to have skin, stomach and suppleness.’

The whale – the young, strong one – pushed further down, deeper than it had ever been before.

‘Are you a fish or a plant?’ it asked. ‘Or are you merely the work of up-above that cannot get on down here with us?’

But the telegraph cable didn’t answer; that is not part of its nature. Thoughts passed through it, human thoughts; in one second they travelled the many hundreds of miles from country to country.

‘Do you want to answer or be snapped?’ the voracious shark asked, and all the other fish asked the same thing: ‘Do you want to answer or be snapped?’

The cable didn’t move, it had its own strange thought, and that is how it can be when one is full of thoughts.

‘Just let them snap me, then I will be hauled up and repaired, this has happened with others like me, in lesser waters!’

So it didn’t answer, it had other business to attend to, it was telegraphing, performing its legal business on the sea bed.

Up above the sun set, as humans call it, it started to look like a bright-red fire, and all the clouds in the sky gleamed like fire, the one more magnificent than the other.

‘Now we’ve some red lighting!’ the polyps said, ‘now the thing can perhaps be seen more clearly if necessary.’

‘Onto it, onto it!’ the catfish shouted, showing all of its teeth.

‘Onto it, onto it!’ the swordfish and the whale and the conger eel said.

They rushed forward, headed by the catfish; but just as they were about to bit into the cable, the sawfish out of sheer impetuosity came to ram its saw right into the rear of the catfish – that was a great mistake, and the catfish did not have the strength to bite.

There were ructions down in the muddy depths: big fish and small fish, sea slugs and sea snails rushed at each other, ate each other, squashed and squelched. The cable lay still carrying out its tasks, as one should.

The dark night was brooding up above, but the billions and billions of tiny creatures in the sea all gleamed. Crabs smaller than the head of a pin gleamed. It is quite marvellous, but that is just the way it is.

The sea creatures looked at the telegraph cable.

What is that thing, and what isn’t it?

Yes, that was the big question.

An old sea cow came along. Humans call that kind of creature a mermaid or merman. It was a she, with a tail and two short arms to splash around with, hanging breasts, and seaweed and parasites on its head, and it was proud of the fact.

‘If you want knowledge and understanding,’ it said, I’m probably the only one that can supply it; but in exchange I am to have safe pasture on the sea bed for me and mine. I am a fish like you by nature, and I am also a reptile by practice. I am the wisest creature in the sea; I know about everything that moves down here, and about everything that is up above. The thing you are all racking your brains about is from above, and what drops down from there is either dead or will become dead and powerless. Leave it for what it is. It’s only some human contraption!’

‘I think there’s a bit more to it than that!’ the little sea fish said.

‘Shut your mouth, mackerel!’ the big sea cow said.

‘Stickleback!’ the others said, and that was even more of an insult.

And the sea cow explained to them that the whole alarming creature, which didn’t say one syllable by the way, was merely a contraption from the dry land. And it gave a short lecture on human guile.

‘They want to catch hold of us,’ it said, ‘that’s the only thing they live for; they cast their nets, come with bait on hooks to tempt us. It’s some kind of a huge line they believe we might bite on – they are that stupid! We won’t! Just don’t touch that botch-up, it will unravel, turn into dust and mud, all of it. What comes from up above is all slime and grime, a waste of time!’

‘A waste of time!’ all the sea creatures said and stuck to the sea cow’s opinion so as to have an opinion. The little sea fish kept its own thought to itself. ‘That immensely long, thin serpent is perhaps the most marvellous thing in the sea. I have a feeling it might be.’

‘The most marvellous thing!’ we humans say too, and say so with knowledge and conviction.

It is *The Great Sea Serpent*, mentioned long in advance in songs and legends.

It is born and bred, originating from human ingenuity and laid on the sea bed, stretching from lands in the east to lands in the west, carrying messages as fast as the rays of light from the sun to our earth. It grows, grows in power and extent, grows year by year, through all the oceans, all round the world, beneath the raging seas and the glass-clear waters where the skipper looks down as if he was sailing through transparent air, sees teeming fish, a whole firework display of colour.

Deep, deep down the serpent stretches out, a beneficial Midgard Serpent that bites its own tail since it encircles the planet; fish and crawling creatures bash their heads against it, but they do not understand the thing from above: humanity's thought-filled serpent of knowledge that passes messages in every language and yet does so silently, for better for worse, the most marvellous of the sea's marvels, *The Great Sea Serpent* of our age.