

THE THING ON OUTER SHOAL

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The first shock must've come about half past nine. It was in between the parts of that Sunday night concert Martha always listens to, during the talking, and I was up on a chair the way I always am at that time, winding the clock. I felt the chair sort of twist under me, and then the clock jumped off the mantel right into my face, and the two of us came down together with a bang.

I must've laid there stunned for a minute before Martha got to me, and I remember the feeling was like being up on a masthead in a high sea. It was like the whole earth was being sucked out from in under me, and then poured back, slow, like mud running into the hole where your foot has been. She had me by the arm, and I was getting my feet under me again when the second shock hit and both of us went down in a heap.

That was the bad one that smashed things all up and down the coast. We had the least of it, and we were high enough to miss the wave that came after it. It was different from the first one—grating and hard, like a ship driving on the rocks. The house jarred until the dishes flew off the shelves in the china closet and Martha's pots and pans came clattering down in a mess on the kitchen floor. The cat came flying through the room like it had fits and went scattering up the garret stairs, and then there was one last drop that nearly had my stomach out of me, and it was over. I've been in quakes before, in Chile, and one time in Japan when I wasn't much more than a shaver, and I had a sort of notion there was more to come. I tried to put up the win-dow, but the twisting the house had had made it stick, so I opened the front door and went out, with Martha right after me.

The fog was in. For two-three days it had been standing off shore and now it was in it was likely to stay. You couldn't see your hand on the end of your arm, but I knew that up on the point the way we are we'd be above anything that was apt to come. We heard it, and then right away we smelled it—rank-full of the rotten muck it had raked up off the bottom of the sea, where things have been dying and settling into the mud for thousands and thousands of years. It sounded like the wind roaring, far away but coming closer, and the smell was enough to make a man gag. I could hear the buoy over Wil-bur's Shoal clanging like mad, and I knew from the sound that it was adrift. Then the wave hit shore and I swear the whole point shook. The spray from it showered over us where we stood by the door, and then it struck again, not so hard, and that was the last except for the smell. We had that with us for a time. We went back inside, because like I told Martha then, if any more was to come it wouldn't matter where we were, and a solid stone house like ours is a pretty safe place to be in come wind or high water. There's not many like it in the entire State of Maine.

I knew the first news would come over the Coast Guard station, so I turned the radio to where they are on the dial and sure enough, they were at it already. It didn't make nice hearing. Aside from the earthquake, which was as bad as we've ever had in these parts, the wave had done a pile of damage all up and down the coast. Down through Massa-chusetts the big beaches had been swept clean, but it was after the main season and there wasn't many killed compared to what there might have been.

After a little they began to fit things together. The first quake had been pretty well out to sea—maybe twenty-thirty miles—and north of us, but the second one, the big one, was right off Phillipsport and close inshore. I've fished that bot-tom all my life, and I figured I could place it pretty close. There's a deep place—never sounded to my way of know-ing—between Dorner's Bank and Outer Shoal, and the way it sounded that was where it was.

The fog was in and it stayed for three days. Fog don't bother me any, or Martha neither, so we went down to town next morning but there wasn't any news we hadn't heard on the radio. The Coast Guard plane was waiting for the fog to clear before it went up, and they were getting ready to make new soundings in case the bottom had changed. Up in Alaska there's places where whole mountains have come up out of the sea overnight, and then dropped back again.

The smell was everywhere—rotten fish and rotten seaweed—worse than a keg of lobster bait. We got used to it before the fog lifted. Between 'em the quake and the tidal wave had fetched up the ocean bottom for miles around, and it took a while to settle.

Along Wednesday afternoon you could begin to see a little. The sea off our point was milky, and kind of phosphorescent after sundown. There was all sorts of stuff piled up along the rocks—pieces of sunk ships, buoys, weed, shells, dead fish, lobster pots—every kind of thing. There were lobsters there bigger than any that's been caught in the State of Maine since my grandfather Phillips' time. There was halibut that would weigh up to six-seven hundred pounds, and every kind of fish that was ever in the sea. By Wednesday the smell it made was enough to drive us out, and Martha made me go down with a fork and bury what I could of it.

Wednesday night was clear as a bell, with the moon out full, and I heard the Coast Guard plane up a couple of times. Thursday morning I was up and out with the sun. There wasn't much to see. Clear out to the horizon the sea was chalky with the stuff that had been riled up off the bot-tom, and there were little black spots of drift that wouldn't likely come in for days. I got out my grandfather Waters' glass and went up on the roof, but it didn't do much good. The buoy was gone off Wilburs Shoal, like I thought, and so were all the channel markers. I heard in town that one of them fetched up on the veranda of the old Butler place, a good five miles back from the harbor up the inlet.

Out over Outer Shoal there was a kind of white cloud, and I watched it for a long time before I made out it was gulls—millions of 'em—swinging and swooping around over the shoal like they were following a school of mackerel. Then I heard the drone of a plane and picked it up, following the coast up from the south. It had Coast Guard markings, and pretty soon I heard our own plane sputter up off the water and swing over to meet it. They must've seen the gulls like I did, because they turned and circled out over the shoal. They were there a long time, swinging round and round like two big birds, and every now and then one of them would drop down to get a better look, but after a while they started back and I called to Martha and got my hat and went down to town to see what they had found out.

Well, sir, half the village was down to the Coast Guard station when I got there. The pilot from down the coast turned out to be a Phillipsport boy—Henry Anders' boy Jim—and when he saw me coming he let out a holler.

There was four-five people standing around the planes arguing—all of 'em men I'd been to sea with in my young days—and they were scratching their heads like chickens after corn. Fred Hibbard hailed me first.

"By gaggle," he shouted, "come down here! These boys has a puzzle none of us can answer. Tell him, Jim."

Jim grinned at me. He'd put on flesh since he joined up with the Coast Guard. "Hi there, Cap'n Waters," he said. "Maybe you can tell me more than these old salt-horses here. They claim what we saw on Outer Shoal isn't possible."

Tom Buck is our regular pilot here. "You were on the roof when I swung over," he put in. "Likely you saw the gulls over the shoal. We figured maybe a ship had gone aground and broken up, so we went out there, but it's no ship. We don't know what it is."

Old Colonel Phillips may be ninety and he's my own father's uncle, but he's the cussedest old fool in Phillipsport. He creaks like a rusty gate when he talks, and his store teeth don't fit him any better than you'd expect of a mail-order set, but he's never satisfied until he's had his say.

"Blasted young lubbers!" he piped up. "Smart-Alecs! taint no mystery to me, or no need for one! I remember twice in my life there's been a whale grounded on that shoal, and you look in the town records and you'll find plenty more. That wave'd fetch in anything afloat!"

"How do you feel about that?" I asked them.

Jim Anders scratched his head. He has tow hair like his father's folks. They were Swedes, wrecked here and settled, back in my father's time—first-class seamen, every one of them. "Well," he admitted, "I suppose it could be. But if it is, it's the strangest whale I ever saw."

"We couldn't see much," Tom Buck explained. "The gulls have settled on it like flies on a lobster pot, and we couldn't drive 'em off. But it's big—big as any whale I ever laid eyes on—and it's funny shaped. And—it's white."

"What'd I tell you?" Colonel Phillips was just about pranc-ing. "It's a white whale. Seen 'em many a time!"

"Belugas don't grow that big, Colonel," Buck told him. "And—the shape's wrong."

"Pish! Ever hear about Moby Dick? Ever hear about Killer Ned? There's white whales same as any animal, and most always they're big and mean. How is it now? Pretty ripe, ain't it? Any salvage to it?"

"We couldn't see," Jim told him. "It's no place to set down a plane, with all the drift afloat around the shoal. That quake brought up every derelict this side of the Azores. We've got days of work ahead, locating them. But if you old sea-horses can stand the stench, you might be able to pick up a little tobacco money out there. Whale oil's high."

I could tell then it wasn't only the old men who liked the idea, and I could tell it wasn't going by the board. We may be over sixty, some of us, but there are a few left who have shipped on whalers and know what to do and how to do it. When I went up to the store Henry Anders and Fred Hibbard and Welsh Peters and one or two others were with me, and we found a couple-three more in Clem Potter's back room. Likewise, I saw that the younger men were drifting into Tony Spillani's garage across the street.

It was going to be a race for it, and I could feel my blood getting up at the thought. Likely the young fellers would try to hold off till night and then slip away. We couldn't pull out right in front of 'em, because they'd beat us hull down, but we had to get there first. Then we all of us thought of the colonel.

He knew it, too. He sat back there in Clem's old armchair with a satisfied smirk under his whiskers, waiting for us to ask him. But he couldn't wait long.

"Remembered me, ain't you?" he demanded. "Remembered I got three whaleboats off the old Minnie P, in my boathouse this minute, with engines in 'em and all the gear complete. Remembered I got casks and irons and everything you need, over the other side of the point where there can't nobody tell what you're up to. Want 'em, don't you? Well—owner's third!"

The old skinflint had us, and it didn't matter much to any of us. It wasn't the oil we were after. It was wondering about the thing that had washed up on Outer Shoal—beating the young bucks at a game they figured we were too old for—having the kind of adventure that we all had thought was over and done with. It disappointed him a little when we took him up so quick. He just snorted and handed over the keys to the boathouse. Then an idea tickled him and he let out a cackle like a guinea hen. He poked Clem in the ribs with his cane.

"I'll fix those young squirts for you!" he vowed. "I know the way they're figgerin'. That man at the old livery stable has him a big new launch, an' that's the boat they'll use. I hat an' maybe Peters' and Crandall's. You gimme five pounds of sugar . . . no, by Jake, make it ten pounds . . . an' I'll go down sun myself a mite on the wharf while you're gettin' up a blackberryin' party over to my place. An' don't tell the wimmen!"

The old sculpin! There wasn't one of us would have thought of sugaring their gasoline.

The younger men were still in the garage with their heads together when we came out of the store. We split up—the colonel with his sugar sacks in his coat pockets headed for the wharf, and the rest of us scattering to meet along after dinner at the colonel's boathouse. That would give us the afternoon.

He was a shipshape old devil. Those three boats were as good as the day he got 'em, and the engines were tuned up fit to run a clock. Like as not he had some feller from out of town come and do it so's he wouldn't let on he cared how they were. There wasn't a speck of rust on his whaling irons, and his rope was new—brand new, but with the stiffness worked out of it. It was good gear, all of it. My point hid us from town and would until we were a good two miles out. The colonel's sugar would have to take care of things after that.

We manned two of the three boats. I was steersman in the first and the colonel took the second. We could reach the whale, mark it, and maybe cut a little blubber before night-fall. It was all any of us wanted—except maybe the colonel—the young folks could have the rest with our blessing, after they'd been put in their place.

They'd started up a game of baseball by the time the colonel left town, just to keep our suspicions down, but they must have posted a watch or else someone's wife blabbed. We weren't more than half a mile off the point when we heard the launch start up, and there they came, three boats of them, swinging across to cut us off. I could see the grin on Fred Hibbard's face as he monkeyed with our engine and made

it cough and splutter like it wasn't going good. Let 'em be cocky while they could. They passed us hooting and hollering like wild Indians, and after a time we passed them, lying in the swell, tinker-ing with their engines. The three boats were strung out over a mile or so of sea, and some of the boys were turning a little green. By that time we could see the shoal.

The smell of the thing and the cackle of the gulls reached us long before we sighted it. It was ripe, but it didn't smell like whale to me. It had that seabottom rankness that the quake had brought up, and I began to remember yarns I'd heard about sea serpents and the like of that.

There must have been all the gulls in Maine over that reef. The sea was white with them, bobbing around in the oil slick that had spread from the thing on the shoal. They were stuffed too full to fly, but they covered the thing from the water's edge where it lay awash until it was one big, stinking moun-tain of white feathers, sixty feet long if it was a yard. From the boats we couldn't tell much about how it looked, but was—queer.

My boat was first, and we circled around it and came from the seaward side, down wind. The gulls didn't rise until the boat was almost touching it, and when they did, I looked at the men and they looked at me. Their faces were funny-colored and I guess mine was, too, because it was a man.

The gulls had been, at it for better than a day, but you could see it was a man. It was sixty feet from head to feet, more than fifteen feet across the shoulders, and it was a man. There was a layer of thick white blubber on it under a gray kind of skin. Big blue gills flared out where its neck should have been. And as the boat bumped against it a hand came floating up through the water beside me—wrinkled with the water, and webbed all the way to the tips of the fingers. It was a man.

A cloud had gone over the sun, and the wind was kind of cold on me. The smell of the thing choked me, and the screaming, wheeling birds overhead made my head swim. I reversed the engine and pulled us off a couple of lengths.

The gulls had been at it. All along its barrel of a body they had torn big, jagged holes through its skin and blubber and raw red meat, down to the white ribs. It lay-on its face on the shoal, its back, where there was skin left; dull, gray-white like a shark's belly. On its feet it would have looked kind of stubby, I guess, because it looked 'awl broad for its length, with big, powerful long arms made for swimming, and long, thick legs with webbed feet. Its face was under water, but it had no ears unless the gulls had torn them off, and its head was round and covered with stringy hair like a wad of dirty hemp.

It was a giant man out of deep part of the sea—the part that no man of our kind ever sees or hears tell of, except in sailors yarns. The earthquake had vomited it up out of the sea to die here on Outer Shoal. The marks of the deep were on it, in the way Nature had made it to stand the pres-sure down there thousands of fathoms below, and in the great round scars that were on its back and sides. I knew those marks, and so did most of the others with me—we'd seen them often enough on whales. The Kraken had left them—the giant white squid that lives down in the cold and the black of the sea bottom where only whales go—and things like this.

Then I heard the colonel shout. He had climbed up on the dead thing's body and stood there between its gnarled shoulders looking down at us. Another figure

bobbed up alongside him—Doc Higbee—and the two of them stooped down to study the thing they were standing on. Then the colonel straightened up as if he'd had a kink in his back and I heard him screech.

We had pulled off into the deep water that goes down like the side of a mountain off Outer Shoal. We had all been watching the two on the thing's back, but now we turned to look.

Out of the water a hundred feet away rose a face. Long hanks of grizzled hair hung over it, and out between them stared two huge, black, goggling eyes. There was a smear of white flesh between them where it should have had a nose. Its mouth stretched halfway across its head right under those staring eyes, and it was filled with little sharp pegs of teeth. The gills began below—a purple frill of flesh, opening and closing as it breathed. As it rose higher its mouth gaped open to suck in air, and I could see it had no tongue.

It found footing on the shelving edge of the shoal, a boat's length away, before I had sense enough to move. Then I grabbed for the gas lever and we were hipering out of its way. But it didn't pay us any heed. The water was just under its armpits as it stood there, with its webbed hands floating on the water in front of it. It climbed higher—it was the sea-man's mate come after him out of the deeps!

The two men on the carcass were scrambling down the other side into their boat. The colonel made it, but Higbee slipped and splashed into the water. By now the woman-thing was standing knee-deep in the sea beside her mate. I wondered how she could support that monstrous body out of water, but she had giant's muscles. Her great saucer eyes stared at the dead thing, and one webbed hand took it by the shoulder and turned it over.

Then she saw the other boat. It had waited to pick up the doctor, and the men were struggling frantically over the engine with the little colonel hopping and cursing in the bow. She made a lunge toward it and stumbled over the carcass of her mate. The wash as she smashed into the sea nearly overset the boat, but they righted it and suddenly we heard the engine start. It sputtered a moment and stopped.

Henry Anders was harpooner on my father's whaler and he was bow man in my boat now. He got to his feet, picking up the heavy blubber spade at his side, as we came within range of the thing. It was never meant for throwing, but he hurled that iron like a lance. It struck the sea-woman's shoulder and sliced deep into the thick flesh, so that I could see the purplish blood running. She stopped, shoulder deep, and turned to face us.

Then, close by the colonel's boat and almost within reach of her groping hand the sea went suddenly white and smooth. A great, twisting tentacle went snaking out over the surface of the water and touched its thwart. Like a flash it clamped over the bow, inches from the colonel. A second followed it, and then the monster's body rose slowly out of the waves—two evil black pools of ink for eyes—a great white parrot beak—and surrounding them a nest of corpse-white tentacles. The Kraken! It gave off a sickly kind of scent, and the sea-woman smelled it. She seemed to hunch down into the sea. They stared at each other for the space of a minute, and I saw its huge arm uncoiling from around the boat as it watched her. It was wary, but there was no fear in it—or her. Then, like lightning, she pounced; like coiling ropes its tentacles twined round her body, biting deep in the blubber.

Her strength was terrible. Her webbed fingers dug into the Kraken's rubbery flesh; the muscles swelled along her arms and across her naked back, and she tore the monster's body in her hands as if she was tearing rags. But it had its grip; its tentacles sucking and ripping at her leathery skin. One arm was bound fast to her body, and the tip of one tentacle was prying at her heaving gills.

Her legs were spread, her back bent; the muscles under her coat of blubber stood up in long, low ridges across her back as she set her fingers in the great squid's flesh and tore it loose. Those webbed fingers closed over its staring eyes and gaping beak and squeezed, and the flailing tentacles went limp.

She stood there, thigh-deep in the bloody seat, staring at the dead thing in her hands. She dropped it and her bulbous eyes swung slowly from one boat to the other. Suddenly she lunged forward and the water closed over her head. Then panic struck us.

We may have made ten boat lengths before she reached us. Out of the sea at my elbow the curve of her enormous shoulder rose against the boat. Her groping hand closed over the bow and pulled it under, hurling us over the side into the sea. As I came up, struggling for breath, I could hear the wood splinter in her fist. She dropped it and looked around her for us.

I hadn't heard the plane till then. We were too close for Jim Anders to use his gun, but he zoomed up past her face and she flinched back and batted at him like a kitten at a string. Her head swung around on her shoulders to watch him, and as he dived again she began to flounder away toward the shoal and the body of her dead mate. That gave him an idea. The rap of his machine gun sounded over the whine of the diving plane—every Coast Guard plane had been armed since that trouble off Nantucket. Gouts of flesh spurted where the bullets struck the dead thing's pulpy form. The sea-woman was swimming frantically away from us. She found her footing again and pulled herself erect, her arms stretched up at the attacking plane. And Jim Anders dived for the third time and shot her down.

There was enough life left in her even then to carry her back into the deep out of which she came. Sometimes it seems that I can see her, swimming painfully down into the black-ness and the cold and the quiet, until the last of her life flows out of her and she sinks down into the everlasting darkness where she was born. It was too bad it had to happen like it did.

We came out of it all right. Not even the colonel had more than a week's layup with his blood pressure. Of course we had to take a tongue-lashing from the womenfolks, but we'd figured on that anyway.

The boys in the launches were scared stiff. They'd seen the whole thing, but they couldn't raise a finger to help. The colonel had done a bang-up job on that gasoline. We don't talk about it much in Phillipsport. Everyone in town knows about it, and it's no secret, but we don't like to talk about it much. It wasn't the kind of thing that sets well with a man.

It happened, though—no mistake about that. I have the proof. The pictures Tom Buck made before they bombed the thing to bits and let the sea have it again didn't come out. The gulls were back, and you can't see much but the shape of it. Far as I know, I have the only other proof there is. I got that from Doc Higbee the winter before he died.

Doc had had time, when he and the colonel landed on the thing, to slice off a chunk of skin and blubber and a mite of the flesh underneath. He kept them by him, even in the water, and stowed them away in alcohol when he got back.

The pieces of skin he got shows one of the great round scars that the Kaken left. Maybe they feed on each other, down there miles under the sea where nothing but whales ever get to. Doc said it was human skin. He said the blood in it is human blood, only just about as salty as sea water is today. He showed me a book where it tries to figure out when our first ancestors crawled out of the sea, millions of years back, by measuring the amount of salt in our blood and figuring, the amount of salt there was in the sea then. He said they were supposed to match, otherwise things couldn't keep alive.

Suppose some of those things that turned into men stayed in the sea when our ancestors came out on land, Doc said. Suppose they went right on living in the, sea, changing the same way the things on land did, growing big enough and strong enough to stand the pressure and the cold down there. They might change into things like the Ones we saw, Doc said. There couldn't be many of them, he thought. There wouldn't be enough to eat, except for squids and whales and dead things that sank down from above.

There was a reporter from Boston, a year or two back, got wind of the story some way and tried to pump it out of us. He spent near a week here, I guess, talking to this one and that one. The way he had it, it was a sea serpent that was washed up on the shoal. Well, sir, after a while it got around to the colonel, and I never did hear the like of the yarn he told that man. It was too good. I guess the feller figured it was all lies, which it mostly was, and judged the rumor was the same. Anyway, we've never been bothered about it since—until now.