

PART ONE

I. A RUNAWAY REEF



he year 1866 was marked by a peculiar development, a baffling, bewildering phenomenon that surely nobody has forgotten. Without getting into those rumors that troubled civilians in the seaports and muddled public thinking even far inland, it must be said that professional seamen were especially alarmed. Traders, shipowners, sea captains, skippers and master mariners from Europe and America, naval officers everywhere, and at their heels the various national governments on those two continents all were extremely disturbed by the business.

In essence, over a period of time several ships had met up with “an enormous thing” at sea, a long spindle-shaped object that sometimes gave off a phosphorescent glow and was infinitely larger and faster than a whale.

As entered in various logbooks, the relevant data on this apparition agreed pretty closely as to the makeup of the object or creature in question, the record-setting speed of its movements, its startling ability to get from one location to another, and the unique energy it seemed to enjoy. If it was a cetacean, it exceeded in bulk any whale classified by science to that day. No naturalist, not Cuvier or Lacépède or Messrs. Duméril and de Quatrefages, would have accepted the existence of such a monster unless he’d seen it himself—seen it, let’s emphasize, with his own trained scientific eyes.

After striking an average of the estimates made on various occasions—ignoring the timid appraisals that gave the object a length of only 200 feet and excluding the exaggerated claims that it was a mile wide and three long—you could state that this phenomenal creature exceeded by far any dimensions previously acknowledged by ichthyologists, assuming it existed in the first place.

Now then, it *did* exist, this was an undeniable fact, and since the human mind is automatically partial to wondrous things, you can appreciate the worldwide excitement caused by this uncanny apparition. As for relegating it to the realm of fish stories, that charge had to be dropped.



A runaway reef.

To get down to cases, on July 20, 1866, the steamer *Governor Higginson* from the Calcutta & Burnach Steam Navigation Co. met up with this moving mass 500 miles off the east coast of Australia. At first Captain Baker thought he was facing an unknown reef; he was even getting ready to fix its exact position, when two waterspouts shot out of this bewildering object and sprang hissing into the air some 150 feet. So unless this reef was subject to the sporadic eruptions of a geyser, the *Governor Higginson* had fair and honest

dealings with some aquatic mammal, unknown till that moment, whose blowholes spurted waterspouts mixed with air and steam.

Similar events were likewise witnessed in Pacific seas, on July 23 of the same year, by the *Christopher Columbus* from the West India & Pacific Steam Navigation Co. Consequently this extraordinary cetacean could transfer itself from one locality to another with surprising speed, since, within the space of just three days, the *Governor Higginson* and the *Christopher Columbus* had spotted it at two positions on the charts separated by a distance of more than 700 nautical leagues.

Two weeks later and 2,000 leagues farther, the *Helvetia* from the French transatlantic line and the *Shannon* from the Royal Mail fleet, running on opposite tacks in that part of the Atlantic lying between the United States and Europe, respectively signaled each other that they'd sighted the monster in latitude 42° 15' north and longitude 60° 35' west of the meridian of Greenwich. In their simultaneous estimates they were able to put the mammal's minimum length at more than 350 English feet, since both the *Shannon* and the *Helvetia* were of smaller dimensions, though each measured 330 feet from stem to stern. Now then, the largest whales, those rorqual whales that frequent the waterways of the Aleutian Islands, have never exceeded a length of 185 feet—if they even reach that.

One by one reports arrived that would deeply affect public opinion: new estimates made by the transatlantic liner *Pereire*, the Inman line's *Etna* running afoul of the monster, a sworn statement drawn up by officers on the French frigate *Normandy*, ultracareful reckonings obtained by Commodore Fitz-James's staff aboard the *Lord Clyde*. In more lighthearted countries people joked about this phenomenon, but such serious, practical countries as England, America, and Germany were keenly concerned.

In every big city the monster was the latest rage; they sang about it in the coffee houses, they ridiculed it in the newspapers, they dramatized it in the theaters. The tabloids found it a fine opportunity for chasing wild geese. Since news editors are always short of copy, you saw the reappearance of every gigantic imaginary creature within memory, from "Moby Dick," the dreadful white whale of the High Arctic regions, to the stupendous kraken whose tentacles could entwine a 550-ton craft and drag it down into the ocean depths. They even reprinted statements from ancient times: the views of Aristotle and Pliny accepting the existence of such monsters, then the Norwegian narratives of Bishop Pontoppidan, the descriptions of Paul Egede, and finally the reports of Captain Harrington—whose good faith is above suspicion—in which he claims he saw, while aboard the *Castilian* in 1857, one of those enormous serpents that till then had frequented only the seas of France's old extremist newspaper, the *Constitutionalist*.

An endless debate then broke out between believers and skeptics in the scholarly societies and scientific journals. The "monster matter" had everybody fired up. During this unforgettable crusade journalists who specialized in science battled with those who specialized in humor, spilling waves of ink and some of them even two or three drops of blood, since they went from sea serpents to the most offensive personal remarks.

For six months the war seesawed. With untiring zest the popular press took potshots at feature articles from the Geographic Institute of Brazil, the Royal Academy of Science

in Berlin, the British Association, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., at discussions in the *Indian Archipelago*, in *Cosmos* published by Father Moigno, in Petermann's *Mitteilungen*,¹ and at the science sections of the major French and foreign newspapers. When the monster's opponents quoted a saying by the zoologist Linnaeus that "nature doesn't make leaps," humorous writers in the popular periodicals parodied it, maintaining in essence that "nature doesn't make lunatics," then ordering their contemporaries to never give the lie to nature by believing in krakens, sea serpents, "Moby Dicks," and other all-out efforts from drunken seamen. Finally, in a much-feared satirical journal, an article by its most popular columnist squelched the monster for good, attacking it like the old dragon slayer Hippolytus and polishing it off in the midst of worldwide laughter. Humor had defeated science.

During the first months of the year 1867, the whole matter seemed to be dead and buried—and it didn't seem due for resurrection—when new facts came to the public's attention. It was no longer an issue of a scientific problem to be solved, but of a real and serious danger to be avoided. The matter took a completely new turn. Once again the monster became an islet, rock, or reef, but a runaway reef, shifty and hard to pin down.

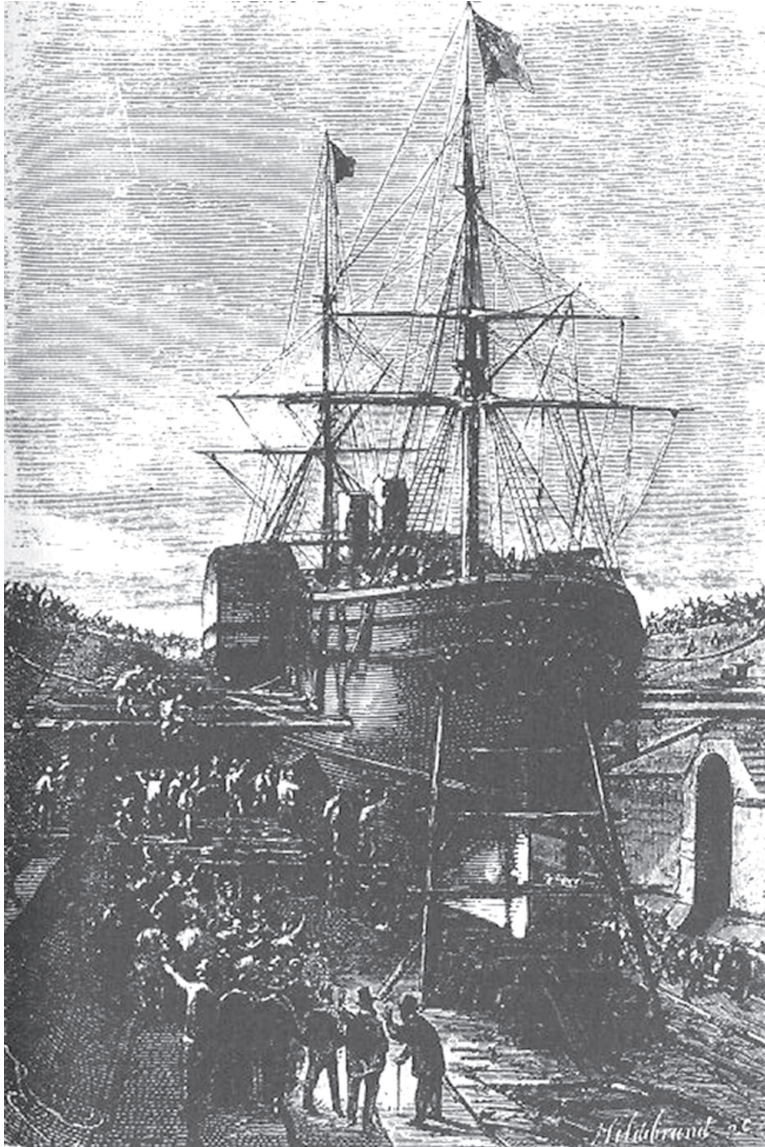
On March 5, 1867, the *Moravian* from the Montreal Ocean Co., lying during the night in latitude 27° 30' and longitude 72° 15', ran its starboard quarter afoul of a rock not marked on any charts of those waterways. Under the combined efforts of its 400-horsepower steam and the wind, it was going at a speed of fifteen miles per hour. If its hull hadn't been of exceptional quality, the *Moravian* would surely have cracked open from the impact and gone down along with the 237 passengers it was bringing back from Canada.

This accident happened around five o'clock in the morning, just as day was beginning to break. The officers on watch rushed to the craft's stern. They examined the ocean with the most scrupulous care. All they saw was a strong eddy about a third of a mile away, as if those sheets of water had been forcefully churned. They took the site's exact bearings, and the *Moravian* continued on course apparently undamaged. Had it run afoul of an underwater rock or the wreckage of some huge derelict ship? They couldn't say; but when they examined its underside in the service yard, they found that part of its keel had been smashed.

Though this event was tremendously serious in itself, it still might have been forgotten like so many others, if, three weeks later, it hadn't been duplicated under identical circumstances. Only this time, thanks to the nationality of the ship victimized by this new ramming, and thanks to the reputation of the company to which this ship belonged, the development caused a huge uproar.

There isn't a soul alive who hasn't heard of the famous English shipowner Cunard. In 1840 this shrewd businessman launched a postal service between Liverpool and Halifax using three wooden ships with 400-horsepower paddle wheels and a burden of 1,281 tons. Eight years later the company increased its assets by adding four 650-horsepower ships at 2,006 tons, and in two more years two other vessels of still greater power and tonnage.

1. *Translator's note.* German: "Newsletter."



The engineers then proceeded to inspect the *Scotia*.

In 1853 the Cunard Co., whose mail-carrying charter had just been renewed, consecutively added to its assets the *Arabia*, the *Persia*, the *China*, the *Scotia*, the *Java*, and the *Russia*, all ships of top speed and after the *Great Eastern* the largest to ever plow the seas. Hence, in 1867 this company owned twelve ships, eight with paddle wheels and four with propellers.

I'm providing these heavily condensed details to help everybody understand the importance of this maritime transportation company, known the world over for its shrewd management. No transoceanic navigational undertaking has been conducted with greater skill,

no business dealings have been crowned with greater success. In twenty-six years Cunard ships have made 2,000 Atlantic crossings, never canceling a voyage, never experiencing a delay, never losing a man, a vessel, or even a letter. Accordingly, despite strong competition from France, passengers still pick the Cunard line over all others, as a survey of official documents from recent years will confirm. Given that, nobody will be surprised at the uproar caused by this accident involving one of its finest steamers.

On April 13, 1867, with a smooth sea and a moderate breeze, the *Scotia* lay in longitude 15° 12' and latitude 45° 37'. It was going at a speed of 15½ miles per hour under the thrust of its thousand-horsepower engines. Its paddle wheels were churning the sea with perfect steadiness. Its draft of water was 22 feet and its displacement 233,924 cubic feet.

At 4:17 in the afternoon during a high tea for passengers gathered in the main lounge, a collision occurred, barely noticeable on the whole, affecting the *Scotia's* hull in the quarter a little astern of its port paddle wheel.

The *Scotia* hadn't run afoul of something, it had *been* fouled, and by a cutting or puncturing instrument rather than a blunt one. This encounter seemed so minor that nobody on board would have been troubled by it—if it hadn't been for the shouts of crewmen in the hold, who climbed on deck yelling:

“We're sinking! We're sinking!”

At first the passengers were quite frightened, but Captain Anderson hastened to reassure them. In reality there couldn't be any pressing danger. Divided into seven compartments by watertight bulkheads, the *Scotia* could brave any leak with impunity.

Captain Anderson immediately made his way into the hold. He found that the sea had invaded the fifth compartment, and the speed of this invasion proved the leak was considerable. Luckily this compartment didn't contain the boilers, because their furnaces would have gone out instantly.

Captain Anderson called an immediate halt, and one of his sailors dived down to appraise the damage. A few seconds later he'd verified that there was a hole 6½ feet wide in the steamer's underside. A leak that big couldn't be patched, so with its paddle wheels half swamped, the *Scotia* had no choice but to continue its voyage. By then it lay 300 miles from Cape Clear, and after three days of delay that filled Liverpool with acute anxiety, it entered the company docks.

The engineers then proceeded to inspect the *Scotia*, which had been put in dry dock. They couldn't believe their eyes. Eight feet below its waterline gaped an orderly gash in the shape of an isosceles triangle. This breach in the sheet iron was perfectly formed and couldn't have been cleaner if it had been die cut. So it must have been produced by a puncturing tool of uncommon toughness—plus, after being launched with prodigious power and then piercing 1½ inches of sheet iron, this tool had to have withdrawn itself by a backward movement truly bewildering.

This was the last straw and it ended up arousing public passions all over again. From then on, in fact, any marine casualty without an established cause was charged to the monster's account. This outrageous animal had to shoulder responsibility for all missing vessels, whose number is unfortunately considerable—some 3,000 shipwrecks are recorded annually

at the maritime information bureau, and the number of steam or sailing ships presumed lost with all hands, in the absence of any news, totals at least 200!

Now then, fairly or unfairly, it was the “monster” who stood accused of their disappearance; and since the creature was making it more and more dangerous to travel between the various continents, the public spoke its mind and demanded straight out that this fearsome cetacean be removed from the seas at any cost.