

# Battle with a Devilfish

Half-ton Monster Tows Boat to Sea, Then Tries to Sink It After Being Shot, but Occupants Escape Grim Death

By WILLIAM HORNE

HAL LANEY, fisherman, is not a famous man. True, his activities are limited to those waters along the Atlantic and the Gulf that touch Miami and around the keys. But his prowess as an adventurous deep-sea fisherman is known all along the coast wherever thrilling sports are entertained.

I have known him intimately for the last ten years of his forty years of hectic life along Florida's coast, and of many strange and bizarre experiences that have been his as he played about in those tropic waters.

And among those experiences there are two that stand out more vividly than all the rest. Oddly enough, the first happened on land, and in a boat!

During the never-forgettable Miami boom, Hal Laney owned and operated a forty-foot launch, the Ethel B. He used the splendid little craft at his business of taking fishing parties out into the Gulf Stream on daily deep-sea fishing excursions.

After the bottom of the boom dropped out, Hal's business began falling off, so he decided to sell the launch, get a smaller craft for his own personal fishing and "spend the difference."

It was while the Ethel B. was on display, tied up at the wharf on the edge of Biscayne Boulevard in Biscayne Bay, that the hurricane struck Miami.

Hal knew the storm warnings had been issued, but he thought he'd be safe enough, tied up as he was to starboard and to port hard against a wharf. So when the night before the storm came he crawled into his cozy twelve-foot cabin and went to sleep to the restless tune of a rising wind and lapping water and rustling palm fronds.

"But I didn't sleep long," he declares, "for it was after 11 when I lay down and hardly 3 the following morning when the first of the hurricane began really bearing down."

"I woke up to the sudden violent lurching of the Ethel B., and after I'd climbed hurriedly into my trousers and coat I tried to open the cabin door. But that was just about next to impossible, for the door hung to the outside, and a sixty-five-mile wind held it sealed tight.

"So I sat on my bunk and tried to see out a small porthole, and the launch was pitching so wildly by this time that I could hardly keep my seat. I could see nothing outside but a sheet of rain, intermittent flashes of lightning, palm trees that were snapped off like stems and bent straight with the moaning wind. Now and then one that had been torn completely up would go bouncing along the pavement of Biscayne Boulevard, tumbling like an empty paper bag.

"The Ethel B. was lurching and swaying like a drunken man and I suddenly realized that the bay was rising and rising fast.

## Carried to Land

"WAVES tumbled in and broke over the wharf. As I watched in the half-light of my cabin lamps that threw an eerie beam through the tiny hatches I saw the waters of the bay steadily creep and cover the wharf, and the Ethel B. went with it.

"The boat was listing badly now, and I knew I'd have to get out of that cabin some way, so I made my way to the door again. But just as I got my hand on

the knob a terrific wave broke to the stern and my world turned over. I remember vaguely of taking a dive across the cabin and throwing up my left arm as my face crashed into the wall.

"I remember the pain in my wrist as it snapped, and the pain of it as my nose smashed into the wall. Between the both of them I went out like a light."



Hal Laney regained consciousness just about, as near as he could figure afterward, an hour later.

## Battle With Devilfish

THE great manta, or devilfish, is a powerful and dangerous foe, and some specimens have been harpooned in congenial salt waters that measured twenty-two feet and weighed a ton and a half.

This monstrosity is a member of the rays or stingarees and is equipped with a powerful, long tail tipped with a horn-like spike that can be driven through the body of a man with one terrific sweep.

Swimming so near the surface in this manner makes them very easy to locate by fishermen who love the sport of harpooning them, and it was after sighting two "wing tips" that Hal Laney suddenly decided one day to try for a catch.

"I was in a twelve-foot dory, and I turned hard about when I located my sea devil," he relates, "in an effort to head him off. My Negro helper, Jim, handled the tiller and I crouched in the bow with my harpoon.

"I had the twenty-foot line that was attached to the gig coiled at my feet, everything ready for the cast. And that devilish thing came right on straight to meet me. I don't know whether it saw me. Anyway, it came to within ten feet of the dory and I stood up, hurled the harpoon and made a direct hit.

"During the first second or two nothing happened and the four-and-a-half-foot harpoon stuck upright from the thing's back. But suddenly, as if it realized something was wrong, it flopped over like a whale and went toward the bottom at terrific speed.

"I saw as he flopped over that he was a monster, probably ten feet long, eight feet across and three feet thick. As my line paid off as he dived I wondered if it would hold, and if it did hold if he'd just take us right down, bow first, to the bottom of the Gulf Stream.

## Headed for Open Sea

"THE line held all right, and the manta decided he didn't want to take us to Davy Jones' locker just then. So he came straight back up like a cy-

*He had his high-powered rifle in his hands and decided he was going to end the grim game. As he fired, the giant monster came up out of the water like a huge volcano*

clone, broke through the water ten feet from the dory and shot up into the air. For one long moment I stared at the thing, hardly believing it could possibly be so big. And then it came down nearer the dory with a splash that almost swamped us.

"Several times we crouched there waiting to be smashed to pieces as it leaped time and again clear of the surface and flopped grotesquely in the air.

"But finally it dived again, came up and headed to the open sea, taking our dory along behind as it had been no more than the empty tow line that ran through the eye of the harpoon still quivering in its back.

"Jim sat beside the tiller, scared goggle-eyed, and I crouched in the bow with my knife hovering over the taut line, none the less afraid.

"I was hesitant about cutting the line and losing our devil, because he was the largest I'd ever seen and I was anxious to get him back to Miami with me. I didn't know what to do. There we were, heading out into the open sea at probably twenty miles an hour, and the evening tide coming in. Waves rolled higher and sometimes caught our little dory broadside as the manta suddenly changed his course. And still we followed him, playing a game of follow-the-leader with a monster that might at any moment suddenly turn and charge the craft and smash it with one terrific lunge.

"I had my high-powered rifle in my hands now and signaled to Jim that I was going to try to end the grim game. So I sighted carefully just between the wing tips and pulled the trigger.

"And then bedlam did tear loose. That devil came up out of the water like a volcano. He turned a complete flip in midair, his deadly tail lashing out

within a few feet of my face. The dory shipped water, almost going over. There was nothing to do but crouch there with my rifle and try for another shot, and finally, as he came up the third time and flipped over a scarce dozen feet from me, I let him have it again. Right through the fore part of the body the bullet crashed into his brain, but a sea devil dies hard, and I knew it.

## Attacks the Boat

"AND although he dived under again and suddenly came up very slowly within five feet, I was leery of that slowly lashing tail. I tightened the line to let him swing behind us as we put about for shore. I was leaning overboard with one hand holding the line when he suddenly came to life and made for the dory.

"We had been drifting along serenely enough until then. We were now a mile offshore and I'd begun to think the game was about all over but the shouting.

"But I heard Jim yell, and as he yelled the warning I felt the wash about us and the rise of the dory as the manta dived against the side where I crouched and beneath us.

"At the same moment I felt the tail hit my left forearm and felt that sting go in like a red-hot harpoon. That devil was mad. He had a harpoon in his back and two .38 rifle bullets somewhere inside. I guess he decided he'd take a good swipe at me before he went under for the last time. And he did."

The pain of that sting was so excruciating that within three minutes Hal Laney rolled on deck in agony. The Negro boy, Jim, tied the tiller and slit the wound with his keen skinning knife. He sucked the poison out, then poured powder from a cartridge into the open wound and applied a match. This method of first aid is always used in a case of stings from a ray, and it probably saved Laney's left arm.

Yes, he got ashore with his prize devil, but it had sold itself dearly. No, my book wouldn't be complete without some of the colorful pages from the life of Hal Laney, just plain fisherman, between its covers.