

## THE OCTOPUS, OR CUTTLE-FISH.



HE octopus is called the *eke* by the Hervey Islanders, the *fee* by the Tahitians and Samoans. In the shallow waters of our reefs young octopi abound. At this stage of their history they are known as *maori*, and are eagerly sought for by women and children as a delicacy. The large cuttle-fish which call forth the energy and daring of the islanders, and excite the superstition of a few, are known as *eke tapairu*, i.e., "divine cuttle-fish." The fisherman who catches one of these becomes famous amongst his countrymen.

The octopus is a universal article of diet amongst the South Sea Islanders; but it is very tough and disagreeable to the European palate. I have tasted it many times; but cannot advise my readers to emulate my example. To make it tender, the natives resort to a very cruel practice, viz., beating it with iron-wood sticks, or even pounding it *alive* with large stones.

I once saw a woman deposit in the road, in front of her house, a live poulpe just caught. With unerring instinct the fish began to move towards the sea, which was more than one hundred yards away. The woman repeatedly crushed its tentacula with stones, her excuse being that such was the custom from time immemorial to render the food tender and palatable.

On dark nights the poulpe ventures on the reef, and prowls about in search of food. It often happens that rats run about the sand, close to the water's edge, to pick up scraps of taro left by women and girls engaged in torch-fishing. Very frequently a luckless rat, oblivious of danger whilst enjoying these stray morsels, is suddenly seized by the long

and strong arms of this animal, and, utterly powerless in its grasp, is drowned and devoured.

At Manihiki and Rakaanga, and many other low coral islands lying about six hundred miles from Mangaia, the octopus is accustomed to leave the sea and travel over the sand and broken coral to climb the pandanus trees which grow on the beach, in order to feast upon their sweet-scented and sweet-tasting flowers and fruit. At dawn these curious fish may be seen in clusters on the outspread branches of the pandanus thus enjoying themselves; but as soon as their sharp eyes perceive the approach of their enemy, man, they instantly drop on the stones beneath, and hasten back to their proper element.

A small fish called the *pakevakeva*, with remarkably sharp teeth, persecutes the octopus most cruelly. Its bite is directed to a single arm; the attacker instantaneously retreating to a safe distance, lest it should be enfolded in the fatal embrace of the octopus. Cuttle-fish are often caught which have lost all their eight arms by the repeated attacks of this daring little fish. Such octopi are almost defenceless, and experience great difficulty in feeding, being in the same predicament as a man who should lose his hands and feet; his only remaining resource being a dextrous use of his teeth. If whilst in this helpless state it is not devoured by predatory fishes, the eight arms will grow again, and the octopus will become as active as ever. The octopus, like the chameleon, changes its hue at will in order to elude pursuit. The octopus diver is usually provided with a sharp-pointed iron-wood stake, a pocket-knife suspended from the neck, and a small quantity of slacked lime securely wrapped up in leaves. Should

the octopus hide itself in a hole inaccessible to the stake, the lime is spread over the entrance; the poulpe dies instantaneously, and floats to the surface.

The best time for obtaining the octopus is early morning, when it is perfectly white. The contrast with the dark coral bottom enables the diver to see it at a great distance. At midday, and in the afternoon, the ever-changing hues—mottled, yellow, scarlet, and dark brown—almost defy detection.

Should the diver lose his hold of the octopus, a sudden discharge of sepia most effectually conceals it. This sepia is highly prized for bait by anglers of the *api*, a dark spotted fish very plentiful in these waters. When mixed with candlenut oil and plastered over the fish-hook, it is greedily devoured.

It has been disputed in Europe whether the octopus ever attacks human beings. No native of Polynesia doubts the fact. A fisherman rarely goes alone in quest of octopi; he has usually a trusty friend in the canoe to take care of it. In case of peril, this friend anchors the canoe, and dives down to the assistance of his companion. Saturday is the favourite fishing-day throughout the islands, in preparation for the approaching Sabbath. Not long since the best diver on Mangaia set off with a friend in quest of materials for a good dinner. Peering down through the clear water, he saw with pleasure a very large octopus, with its tentacula spread out over the coral bottom. He accordingly dived down about twelve feet, and prepared to strike the creature, but the octopus had seen its foe and moved its position, so that when Tauri had reached the bottom, it was behind him. Whilst looking about for his victim, he was suddenly made prisoner, both arms being secured by the tentacula of this formidable mollusk. He struggled hard to extricate one hand in order to get at his knife; but in vain. It now occurred to him to strike his feet against the bottom so as to rise to the surface,

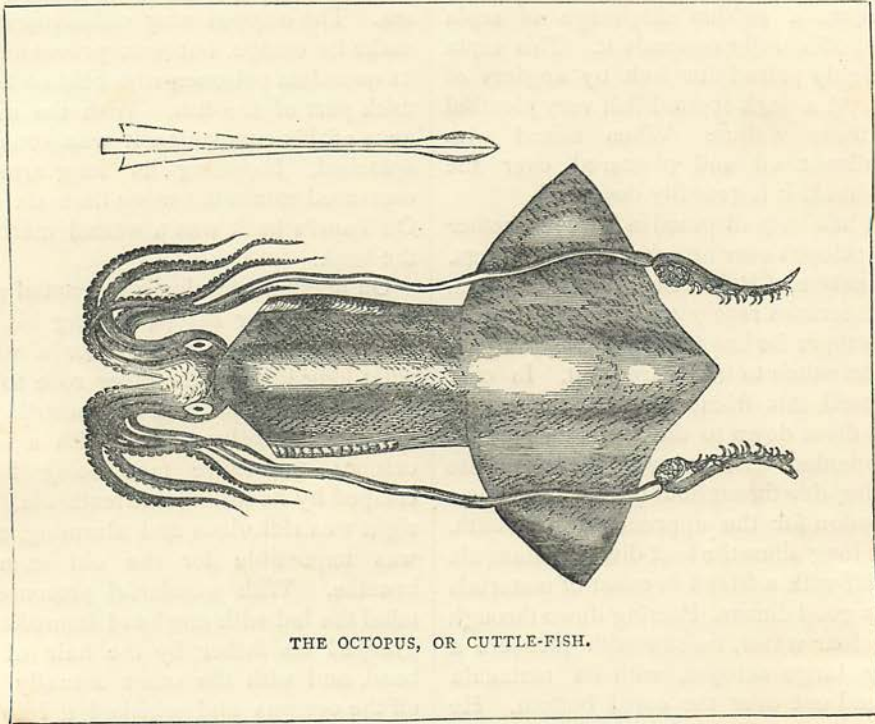
when to his dismay he found that the canoe and his friend had drifted away to some distance! Before it was possible for his companion to reach him, the pinioned diver sank again. Had this process been repeated Tauri would certainly have been drowned. It then occurred to him to walk as best he could along the rugged coral bottom to the shore. Slowly and painfully he moved on, the foe in no degree relaxing its grasp, until he gained shallow water. Very exhausted he emerged from the sea. The octopus now endeavoured to make its escape, but was prevented by its quondam prisoner, who held on to the thick part of the fish. With the assistance of his companion it was soon despatched. Including its long arms it measured somewhat more than six feet. On Tauri's back was a wound made by the beak.

On another occasion a servant of mine went diving for octopi, leaving his son in charge of the canoe. After a somewhat long interval the diver rose to the surface; his arms free, but nostrils and mouth completely covered with a large octopus, the entire face being firmly clasped by its formidable tentacula. The sight was ridiculous and alarming, as it was impossible for the old man to breathe. With wonderful presence of mind the lad with one hand immediately grasped his father by the hair of his head, and with the other actually tore off the octopus and whisked it into the canoe. But for this timely aid the old man must have been suffocated, as was actually the case many years ago with a man who foolishly went alone.

A native of Mangaia, well known to the writer, one morning went with a companion to dive for cuttle-fish. According to custom, he had a knife, and a small quantity of slacked lime wrapped up in a leaf of the *Dracæna terminalis*, suspended from his neck. A stout stake of iron-wood was in his hand. On reaching the bottom he saw in a crevice of

the coral the eyes of a large octopus glaring upon him, but ere he could attack it a discharge of sepia hid the sea-monster from sight. Unluckily for him, *both* his hands grasped the stake. To his horror, he suddenly felt the octopus running up his back and firmly clasping his arms. Being a very powerful man, he struggled hard to release himself, but to no purpose whatever. To add to his terror, one of the tentacula had got across his

hand, quickly severed the tentacula which pinioned the poor man. The octopus, however, not relishing this treatment, made off. Both natives now rose to the surface, and got ashore. The original diver was much exhausted, blood oozing from his eyes and ears. He had drunk large quantities of sea-water. His nervous system received a shock from which it never recovered. The sight of the right eye was destroyed. A few months



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open eye, so that he had but one (the left) for use.' Almost bereft of his senses, he quietly remained where he was, hoping that his companion would descend to his assistance. At length his friend, wearied with waiting, expressed a little cocoa-nut oil on the surface of the sea, and then peering down, perceived the peril the fisherman was in. Diving to the bottom, he put his left hand behind his back, and firmly grasping his knife in his right

afterwards he died. The offending cuttle-fish did not exceed six or seven feet in length.

In a neighbouring island, the shallow waters of the reef are enclosed with stone fences, like meadows in the north of England. Openings are made, where, at low tide, fishermen, with large scoop nets, catch the imprisoned fish when endeavouring to escape. Occasionally the grated nut of the noble Barrintonia tree

is plentifully scattered over the enclosed waters as fish poison, without, however, affecting the value of the fish as food. The smaller fish speedily float on the surface dead; the larger and more vigorous fish are only partially stupefied by the poison. The delight of the natives (in which I have often shared) is to chase these larger fish, and strike them with a piece of stout hoop iron. On the day of an "ora," or "fish-poisoning," a captain, attracted by the sight of hundreds of men, women, and children enjoying the sport, put on a pair of immense sea-boots, and strode into the midst of the merry throng; but passing too close to a hollow in the coral, to his astonishment, both his legs were suddenly embraced by a large octopus. My friend could not move an inch. The grasp of the poulpe tightened. Alarmed now for his safety, he shouted lustily for help. Friendly natives soon released him from this awkward predicament by cutting off the tentacula which made him captive. The fish-poison referred to does not sensibly affect the octopus.

The full-grown fish was anciently regarded as a divinity in several of the South Sea Islands. At Rarotonga, the cuttle-fish was the special deity of the reigning Makea family down to the subversion of idolatry. The superstition gained support from a remarkable circumstance connected with a pool of water near the usual landing-place, where passing vessels fill their empty casks. Although usually clear as crystal, at certain phases of the moon it becomes so inky that no one can use it. This is doubtless owing to the presence of cuttlefish, which go there to spawn.

At the Penrhyn Islands it was worshipped down to the reception of Christianity in 1856. When advised by our native evangelists to eat this fish, the heathen said, "We shall surely die if we injure our god." "Try this once," said the teachers, proffering at the same time a cooked octopus which had been caught

by themselves. After much persuasion, one or two of them tremblingly ventured to imitate the example of their spiritual instructors, and just tasted a mouthful. The heathen bystanders felt sure that their impious fellow-countrymen would suddenly swell to an enormous size and burst. After waiting a long time, and finding that no evil consequences followed, they all loudly condemned their own folly in former years, and partaking of the food so entirely new to their palate, pronounced it excellent!

The following amusing yarn, which was told him by a Sussex fisherman, is related by that pleasant naturalist, Mr. Lee:—"We was out fishin' one quiet night," he said, "and had just got our trawl swash, and was a-goin' to hand it in-board, when Bill, here, all of a sudden lets go his holt, roars out like a stuck pig, 'Oh-h-h—what—is that?' and tumbles back'ards into an empty fish-basket. We hadn't no time to 'tend to him till we'd got our haul on deck, but I guessed what was up, and when we looked round we pretty near split our sides with laughing. There was Bill a-leanin' back agin the skiff, wipin' his eyes, to get some muck out of 'em, as he said made 'em smart, and his face for all the world as if Davy Jones had emptied a tar-barrel over his head, and he looking as doleful as a school-boy as has upset the inkstand over his hands, and smeared his face all over with it in rubbin' the tears away while he was a-cryin' for fear the master'd lick him.

Well, sir, to make a short story, it were one o'them scuttles as we're talkin' about, as we'd brought up, and they *can* shoot straight and no mistake. It's my opinion as Mr. Scuttle sighted Bill's nose as soon as he come atop of the water, and aimed right at it, for you can see, sir, as Bill's nose looms as red as Beechy Head light in a fog, and any scuttle as misses it must be a fool. Bill won't forget that dose of ink for a good while yet—will 'ee, old man?"