

THE CENTREFOLD STORY

THE BELL ROCK LEGEND

a traditional tale re-written by Leslie Melville.

The legend is based upon the quotation below and comes from John Stoddard's historical work, 'Remarks on Scotland' published in 1801.

"An old writer mentions a curious tradition which may be worth quoting. "By east of the Isle of May", says he, "twelve miles from all land in the German Seas, lyes a great hidden rock, called Inchcape, very dangerous for navigators, because it is overflowed everie tide. It is reported in old times, upon the saide rock there was a bell, fixed upon a tree or timber, which rang continually, being moved by the sea, giving notice to the saylers of the danger. This bell or clocke was put there



and maintained by the Abbot of Aberbrothock, and being taken down by a sea pirate, a yeare thereafter he perished upon the same rocke, with ship andgoodes, in the righteous judgement of God"

This is a story of two brothers. One of them took to religion, the other took to the sea. One became a monk, then a prior and ultimately an abbot. The other, a sailor, a sea captain and eventually a notorious pirate! For he was as wicked as his brother was good.

Although each was aware of the other's occupation, they had little personal contact. The Abbot prayed often for the sea robber, who, in turn despised his brother's chosen calling and took every opportunity to ridicule and embarrass him.

The Abbot was incumbent at the Abbey of Aberbrothock, some twenty miles to the north east of Dundee. Now just a ruin, the Abbey is located in the centre of the small coastal town that bears its more modern name of Arbroath.

Because of the abbey's proximity to the North Sea, the Abbot had become increasingly concerned about the number of ships that were being wrecked upon a small rocky island just beyond the Firth of Tay. Inchcape, for that is the island's name, was particularly dangerous owing to its rising, even at low tide, no more than a few metres above the surface of the sea. And at high tide and in storms was virtually submerged and invisible. "What could be done", wondered the Abbot, "to protect shipping and the lives of the sailors who were constantly at risk when leaving and entering the firth?"

He called for a meeting between ship owners and leading citizens of Perth and Dundee, many of whom were directly affected by the loss of shipping and valuable cargo. After some lengthy discussion, it was decided that a large bell should be fixed onto the rock. The ringing of the bell in the wind would alert the crewmen aboard the vessels of the dangers lying ahead.

Collections were made and in three months they had sufficient funds with which to purchase a great bronze bell from a bell foundry in Amsterdam. Workers were sent out to the rock to build a

strong gantry on to which the bell would be hung.

At last all was ready and on a particularly bright and sunny day, a flotilla of small boats set out to attach the bell to its housing. The provosts of both Dundee and Perth were in attendance, as was the Abbot and other leading clergymen as the floating procession made its way towards the rock. In a short time the bell was in place; hymns were sung, prayers were said and the bell was blessed. The boats returned to Aberbrothock where a banquet had been prepared to celebrate the success of the mission. It was not long before the deep ringing tones of the bell in the distance told those on land that it was indeed doing its job. The Abbot gave thanks for God's guidance. Many disasters would be averted and more importantly, lives would be saved. Inchcape was soon to become known to mariners, far and wide as 'The Bell Rock'.

Meanwhile, far away in the warm climate of the Mediterranean, the younger brother was robbing and pillaging ships and towns along the Barbary Coast of North Africa. The news of his brother's praiseworthy work he greeted with scorn and disdain. He laughingly claimed that he put the fear of God into more people in a month than the worthy abbot would in his lifetime! Nevertheless, he was irritated that the humble priest was receiving more recognition than was his own notoriety. He planned to do something about it.

Six weeks later, the pirate ship, loaded with booty headed for Scotland, where there were rich and unscrupulous merchants who would pay handsomely for the gold, silver and jewels plundered from the Barbary Coast.

As the ship approached the firth, the bell could be clearly heard. Even though the sea was calm, the gentle breeze was enough to cause the clapper to strike the inside of the bronze casing. The captain gave orders for a boat to be lowered and with six of his crew, he rowed to the rock. Once there, it took less than ten minutes to unhook the bell and roll it into the sea! It sank silently, disappearing below the waves.

The captain gazed at the spot and said almost to himself, "The next visitors to Inchcape won't be blessing the Abbot!" His crewmen looked uneasily at one another, each aware of the dreadful act to which they had been party. They returned to the ship and sailed on to Dundee where the captain completed his unlawful business dealings.

Two days later, he was ready to set sail again, back to the Barbary Coast. This time the sea had a heavier swell, as they sailed out of the firth, heading for the North Sea. The wind became a gale and it began to rain. The crew was nervous and mostly silent. Although they were rough and ready buccaneers, as mariners, they were also superstitious. They each felt acutely aware that a dreadful price would have to be paid for the wickedness of their captain's earlier actions. They were right to be afraid.

As the storm grew in strength, visibility was reduced to nil and control of the vessel became impossible. Suddenly, with a grinding crunch, the ship came to a shuddering stop and immediately lurched onto its side.

They had hit the rock!
There had been no warning bell; for had it not been rolled into the sea two days earlier? Water poured over the ship as it began to break up. The crewmen screamed in terror as they fell into the waves. In a short time, there was nothing left of the ship or its crew, save one lone survivor.

He had a strange tale to tell. He said that he saw the captain dis-



appear into the sea and at that very moment he swore that he had heard the ringing of a bell; as though the Devil himself was bidding the captain, "Welcome!"

The bell was never replaced and it was not until more modern times that a lighthouse was built on the rock. The Inchcape Lighthouse, or as it is more famously known, 'The Bell Rock Lighthouse' has protected shipping ever since.

But even today, sailors will tell you that when the sea in the Firth of Tay is rough, there are times that they can hear the ringing of a deep-toned bell. And when they look into the sky, they see a ghostly sailing ship with one solitary figure pacing the deck!

Copyright © 2000 Leslie Melville.

Concluding thoughts.

I first became aware of The Legend of the Bell Rock in 1998 when I heard a recording of the Scottish actor, Robert Trotter, reading a story with that title written by Captain Frederick Marryat. I was intrigued by Marryat's tale and on further investigation, discovered the more familiar Robert Southey ballad entitled 'The Inchcape Rock'.

Southey refers to the abbot and the pirate, 'Sir Ralph the Rover', although in the ballad, they are not related. Having researched some of the historical detail - very sketchy and inconclusive - I found that the consensus opinion is that the pirate (if he ever existed), unhooked the bell and sank it because he wanted ships to founder on the rock so that he could plunder the wreckage. Given the stormy nature of the sea around Inchcape, this seems to me to be a very risky enterprise and most unlikely.

And so I thought, "What if the Abbot and pirate were brothers?" I considered this to be a much more attractive scenario! Sibling rivalry has always been a good subject for a story. For the pirate to be so consumed with hatred for his brother that he becomes motivated to perform such a terrible act of wickedness also appealed to me and morally justifies the manner of his demise!

Those of you who are familiar with both the Marryat version of the legend, (a completely different story) and Southey's ballad will see that in my tale, I have drawn inspiration from them both. I hope that you find my interpretation no less entertaining for that!

LM