

ON THE TRACK OF THE WHALE

Away beyond Shetland, where the short surges of the North Sea lift to the long swell of the Atlantic, our little steamer bucks and jumps like a yearling pony. The top of her long, jerky funnel describes wondrous ellipses and circles, and her impudent bow, with its preposterous fin in the tip of it, now dips gunwale deep and now clears the forefoot as the waves romp under her.

We are out for whales, and the man in the crow's-nest high on the foremast, and the harpoon and mate in the bridge, are scanning every yard of water with keen, accustomed eyes. Suddenly, as if a cannon shot had struck the water, up goes a column of spray a thousand yards to port. The helmsman's wheel is whirling; the lookout's shout has reached him; down goes the engine-room telegraph to "full-speed ahead," and we are off in chase. That column of spray is the glorious puff that the big "finer" gives as he comes to the surface, blowing the used-up air from his mighty lungs, and ending the sea sky-high ere he replenishes his store.

Think of it, ye swimmers, and, as you recall your own joys in a valiant blow after a dive, envy him the glories of that gigantic exhaust!

A MERRE COCKBOAT.

modern missile weighs a hundred-weight, and its iron shank pretty nearly fits the bore of the gun. Through the length of the shank runs a slot, like a prolonged needle-eye. In this travels an iron ring, to which are attached the line. Between that point and the other end, snug in the hold, is a thousand yards of the best rope the world can make. It is of no great thickness, not so thick for example, as the ut of a billiard cue, but the first couple of hundred yards or thereabout will stand a pull of twenty tons, and the rest is little behind it. Part of it is coiled on the tray, which is fixed to the bow in front of the gun, and it is led over a brass sheave and along the deck round the two drums of the winch, and so into the hold.

But we have not done with the line. The shank is hidden in the gun up to the forward end of the slot. Immediately in front of this are four barrels aligned to the shaft, and held close to it by a lashing of cord round their tips. Each of these barrels is about ten inches long and an inch thick. The lashing is stripped off by the impact with the whale's side, and the four great barrels spread out in its body the moment the pull comes on the line, so that the ship is as securely anchored to its prey as Milton's miner to Leviathan.

A deadly weapon, truly, but its possibilities are not yet exhausted. Screwed on the shaft in front of the barrels is a pointed cast-iron cone, three inches in diameter at the base, and fourteen inches long. It weighs between eleven and twelve pounds, is hollowed and carries a charge of powder and a friction fuse. This is connected to a wire which, after passing through a little hole bored in the nose of the shaft, is made fast to the lashing round the harpoon barrels.

When the lashing is stopped by the whale's side the fuse is fired, and the shell, buried by this time deep in the monster's body, explodes. The whaler's business is to kill, and that quickly, and it must be confessed that he leaves little to chance.

CLOSING ON THE QUARRY.

"Port!" There goes our "finer," a hundred yards to starboard, his black back and big upstanding fin sliding majestically down the great side of a long wave. He has changed his course, and we have overruled him. Back goes the telegraph to "full-speed," the wheel flies round, and we get alongside the wake he has left like a steamer, visible even to the untrained eye for 400 yards or so on the restless surface of the sea.

The harpoon darts down the ladder, and in another second or two has cast loose his gun. With squared yet stooping shoulders and craning head, his ankle on its rock, the big Norseman, with all his hunting instincts awake, scans the track and looks ahead from his perch on the bow. The engineer below in for a busy time, and thanks Heaven for his up-to-date machinery. "Dead slow," comes the order from the bow, then a wave of the hand, and we alter course a point or two and glide slowly onward. In two or three minutes "half speed" again, and then "slow" once more.

The harpoon's imagination is busy gauging the speed and course of his invisible quarry, and responding to indications almost too subtle for words, and engineer and helmsman have no rest. But, unfortunately, the whale does not steer by compass. He changes course as the whim takes him, and perhaps for an hour, perhaps for two hours of even three, he toils us.

Round swings the little steamer, "steady" is the word, and we head for a point in the sea which the eagle-eyed harpooner—who commands the ship—has determined as the place where the unsuspecting monster is likely to rise again.

We have a long chase before us, so there is time to take a look at the craft we are in. A merre cockpit, you would say, and assuredly a displacement of 160 tons or thereabouts seems little enough for the work she has to do. Perched on the bridge, you look down on a deck only 22 feet by 18 feet, and the rail along its sides is no higher than a man can easily climb from a small boat alongside.

Yet the buoyant sheer of the gunwale, rising rapidly from amidships aftward, the full bow, and the fine stern proclaim the smart sea-boat out for business, and her equipment vindicates her title. Packed away in the little engine-room, under the rule of two engineers, are triple-expansion engines, working up to 280 horse power, and fitted with steam reversing gear. On the bridge there is a steam steering gear ready for use at need. A huge steam winch is on the deck between the bridge and the foremast, and away on the very point of the bow is the dumpy harpoon-gun, a modern contrivance about a yard and a half long, with 34 inch bore, and over a ton of steel in its barrel and several mounting. Behind it is a platform flush with the top of the gunwale, on which the harpooner takes his stand, and is wearing his quarry, and from the cannon's muzzle, pointing threateningly down into the sea, protrudes the murderous head of the harpoon.

THE DEADLY HARPOON.

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long-pointed iron pipe connected with a hose which leads to an air-pump is started, and the whale is inflated, so that it shall float of its own buoyancy.

Meanwhile the harpooner has been reloading his gun. A second harpoon is quickly fitted with its loaded shell and pushed home on a fresh charge of powder. The firing fuse is about to be fitted to the breach, when a great blast to starboard makes all look up incredulously. Heading straight across our bows is a huge finner not fifty yards away. The harpooner hurries his preparations with lightning speed, but when the whale shows himself in a few seconds right ahead, a perfect mark, the gun is dumb.

The harpooner, maddened at the tantalizing light, levels it fiercely, but uselessly. The firing attachment is not yet in its place, and with a jarring "poof," that seems charged with contempt, the big brute sweeps magnificently down from the surface, and the harpooner turns his back on the sight and lifts both fists clenched to high Heaven, but whether the whale suffers from that terrible curse, as did the Jackdaw of Rheims from the anathema of the Church, not all the scientists and the whalers of the North Sea will ever be able to tell us. Suffice it that we chased for an hour and more and never got another chance.

THE PROASIC SIDE.

At last, in the fading light, we head for home, ten hours' sail or more away, and as darkness falls those who can leave the bridge seek their bunks, where they are speedily rocked to sleep. The stopping of the screw and a strange sensation of being on an ever-leak sea make the sleeper, and tell him that he is off the whaling-station or manufactory. He goes on deck and sees the low, bare, wind-swept hills of Shetland all round the land-locked harbor, and on the shore, in the grey morning light, the chimneys and great packing-cases-like buildings of the station. One of the ships' boats is already rowing with a line, and has made the whale fast to a buoy, where the gulls swoop down in scores to pick what they can off the whale's belly that floats above the water.

Commerce now holds the field. The remains of the chase are turned into the tumbling surges, the spacious skyline, the threatening cloud-capped peaks of the mountains, the sea, as dream, and we are face to face with dividends. Yet the fascination is as strong for the observing eyes as in anything that has gone before.

As in the ship, so on shore efforts are made to keep the eyes on the taking. In front of you, as you look from the ship, is a square, level wooden platform. From the edge, which is built up on piles about high-water mark, a shipway runs out into the sea. The shore end of the platform are the square buildings of wood and corrugated iron, where the cases are turned into merchantable commodities.

Behind these again are the barracks of the staff. As the bell summons the workers to their morning duties, a skiff brings a line from the wharves to the shore, it is passed around a steam winch and in a few minutes the great carcass, weighing anything from thirty to seventy-five tons, is being hauled flat first up the shipway and on to the platform.

STRIPPING THE BLUBBER.

Rapidly, one of the hands—the "fletcher"—runs his knife, a blade about a foot long, shaped like a bill-hook, sharpened on its convex side, and fitted to a four-foot handle, along a pulley at right angles to the carcass, the huge mass is hauled bodily over, so that it is other side is uppermost, and the process is completed.

The head, huge as it is, is next severed from the body in a few minutes, so expert are the men, and while the flesh is being cut off the carcass in great masses, the skull, which has already been cleared of the whalebone in the upper jaw, is cut into blocks by a steam-saw.

Meanwhile the blubber is fed into a set of revolving knives, which cut it up and pass it into an endless chain of buckets, like those used in the coal mines, and the blubber is converted into a pulp, which is then passed into a grinding mill, turned into a dry powder, so like snuff that even a veteran workman has been led into it accepting a pinch. In this state it contains over 15 per cent of ammonia, and is sold as whale-guano.

EVERYTHING USED.

Waste is brought down to the irreducible minimum; all that is left of the whale is the soupy water condensed from the steam in the cooking cylinders. Even this is turned into a big settling reservoir, and skimmed of its grease, which goes to swell the total yield of oil. What is left is emptied into the sea, and the residue, which the keen manager, who would gladly avail himself of any business-like process that could recover what was lost, is of oil and convert the effluent into pure water.

So rapid are the processes that on one day recently the writer saw seven whales brought by the ships to the wharves between six a. m. and noon, and by noon on the following day the whole mass, weighing, at a reasonable estimate, 250 tons, had passed into the vat.

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Then comes the climax. The harpooner swings to and fro with the swing of the heaving prow, gripping his gun and watching. Then comes the climax. Through the waves, parallel with our course, and some thirty yards off, comes first the head, then a gradually increasing waterline of black glistening side as the head disappears. Will he never fire? You gulp and stretch the rate. Will he never fire? "Crash," goes the gun, belching forth gigantic vads of burning tow, and a cloud of smoke that smothers the ship forward as the wind bears it across to leeward.

And in the sea is chaos. There is a huge upheaval of white belly and black back, a great caudon of foam, and then, before you have realized it, there is nothing but the ship pointing stern, and the line running out slowly and then more slowly already as the drums of the winch put on the brake of the mass and bearings. Now it is still.

The harpooner gets off his platform, looks at the rope taut along the deck, lays hold of it, and pulls it upwards strongly, steadily, indignantly. "Heave away!" The steam goes into the winch engine, and five minutes from the firing the gun the second bulk is hauled aloft out of the depths.

PUMP AIR INTO CARCASS.

The drama is at an end, and yet the scenes to come, if less thrilling, are no less interesting. The carcass is quickly brought alongside, and a heavy chain is bolted round the narrow of the tail and made fast to the side of the ship near the low. The spreading flukes or lobes of the tail are cut out, leaving only a boss to hold the chain in its place. The whale, it should be explained, is not taken on board, but is towed tail first alongside, or astern by a stout hawser, according as the weather is fine or rough, and the removal of the flukes enormously facilitates towing.

The long-pointed iron pipe connected with a hose which leads to an air-pump is started, and the whale is inflated, so that it shall float of its own buoyancy.

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The harpooner gets off his platform, looks at the rope taut along the deck, lays hold of it, and pulls it upwards strongly, steadily, indignantly. "Heave away!" The steam goes into the winch engine, and five minutes from the firing the gun the second bulk is hauled aloft out of the depths.

PUMP AIR INTO CARCASS.

The drama is at an end, and yet the scenes to come, if less thrilling, are no less interesting. The carcass is quickly brought alongside, and a heavy chain is bolted round the narrow of the tail and made fast to the side of the ship near the low. The spreading flukes or lobes of the tail are cut out, leaving only a boss to hold the chain in its place. The whale, it should be explained, is not taken on board, but is towed tail first alongside, or astern by a stout hawser, according as the weather is fine or rough, and the removal of the flukes enormously facilitates towing.

The long-pointed iron pipe connected with a hose which leads to an air-pump is started, and the whale is inflated, so that it shall float of its own buoyancy.

Meanwhile the harpooner has been reloading his gun. A second harpoon is quickly fitted with its loaded shell and pushed home on a fresh charge of powder. The firing fuse is about to be fitted to the breach, when a great blast to starboard makes all look up incredulously. Heading straight across our bows is a huge finner not fifty yards away. The harpooner hurries his preparations with lightning speed, but when the whale shows himself in a few seconds right ahead, a perfect mark, the gun is dumb.

The harpooner, maddened at the tantalizing light, levels it fiercely, but uselessly. The firing attachment is not yet in its place, and with a jarring "poof," that seems charged with contempt, the big brute sweeps magnificently down from the surface, and the harpooner turns his back on the sight and lifts both fists clenched to high Heaven, but whether the whale suffers from that terrible curse, as did the Jackdaw of Rheims from the anathema of the Church, not all the scientists and the whalers of the North Sea will ever be able to tell us. Suffice it that we chased for an hour and more and never got another chance.

THE DEADLY HARPOON.

Ninety-nine people out of a hundred think they have a fair idea of what a harpoon is like. Not one in a thousand has the faintest glimmering of the weapon which the ingenuity of the Norseman Svend Poyd devised a generation ago. The big two-barbed harpoon, which the whalers of Dundee and Peterhead used to hurl with study arm into the black flank of the Greenland whale is an obsolete toy. The

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