

Christmas on a Whale's Back.

The great Christian festival is so intimately associated in the minds of our people with family reunion, joyful feasting, warmth, light and gaiety, that those who are privileged year by year to enjoy it and have not grown cynical as to its observance may very well endure to be reminded of the less fortunate ones, who, by reason of their occupation, accident, or misfortune, spend anything but a happy or merry Christmas. A long list might easily be compiled of those to whom Christmas means nothing, in the midst of an overflowing kindness and earnestness that on this day at least all shall be happy, they are condemned to be shut out from it all from no fault of their own. But such is not my intention; I only wish to set down, as plainly as may be, a record of the most perilous and comfortless Christmas ever spent by me during a curiously adventurous life.

Twenty-six years ago I found myself in the position of fourth mate or "boat-header" of an American South Sea whaler, on that particular Christmas day cruising in the north Pacific. I was very happy, for the skipper was a splendid fellow whom we all loved, a man to whom injustice was unknown, and withal, one who never begrudged a seasonable word of praise to anyone whom he thought deserved it. Moreover, I had long felt an intense desire to measure my prowess against that of the mighty sperm whale, and with all the calmness and insolence of youth and inexperience, felt sure that I should be able to teach the cautious, conservative old whalefishers, my shipmates, some wrinkles in whale hunting of which they had never dreamed, as soon as opportunity to do so was afforded me. But all the same I may as well say at once that the last thing desired was an opportunity to fight whales on Christmas day.

It was our third Christmas on board, but the first under the new regime, and controversy raged high as to whether the old man would take any notice of the day or continue the secular work as the previous skipper had done, not recognizing, as he said, any holidays but Sunday and the Fourth of July. For sailors on board English-speaking vessels very strangely cling to the idea that Christmas should be a holiday and that something should be added to the meagre diet scale to mark the event. That controversy remained unsettled. Christmas day dawned in primitive splendor upon a sleeping sea, a cloudless sky. The throbbing pulses of the morning filled all heaven with beauty untellable, every tender hue that the eye can discriminate came in quick sequence over the glorious breadth of ocean. A pair of sleepy men climbed languidly aloft to their respective crows' nests and had hardly settled themselves in position when he at the fore, a southern Kanaka, threw back his head and emitted his long-drawn, musical cry of "Blo-o-o-w-n" at the same moment as I did myself. Suddenly, as if all had been waiting the signal, the hands swarmed up from below, all knowing that Erreanao would never have prolonged his call like that had he not known that what he saw was a sperm whale. I was the first officer to be in a boat—was I not eager as young hound to be unleashed! The skipper came painfully up, for he was incapacitated by an accident from moving except at a crawl, and gave a few quiet orders. To these there followed in quick succession the pleasant whirr of the sheaves as the boats dropped lightly into the water in due order of precedence, mine last. As we glided away from the ship I heard the warning voice of the skipper over my head, saying, "Naow boy, jest mine wut yer doin. Doan get int' no miss-chief if kin he'p it." I whispered back, "Aye, aye, sir," most earnestly, in-

wardly resolving to make a chance for showing off if I did not get one legitimately.

The four boats spread out fan-wise, under sail, but with all hands plying their paddles in perfect silence, in order to get as much way on the boats as possible with the light airs prevailing. The whales, all unaware of the nearness of their enemies, were pursuing their leisurely way, the spouts rising with the regularity of one's breath in sleep. We gained upon them rapidly, so rapidly as to show that they were merely lolling on the lovely sea surface getting their lungs completely refreshed, and with no other object in view. Nearer and nearer we drew; there was a breathless pause, a yell of triumph followed by a fierce yell of rage, for the mate's harpooner had missed! This of course, galled the whales, who broke their order and

or that as need came, avoiding as if by miracle the awful rushes of the raging whale. And I, nervously dreading the use of the hand-lance on such a rushing, ravaging beast, loaded a bomb gun and held it ready to my shoulder. The whale disappeared, leaving the water a whirlpool of curling foam. All hands strained their eyes for his coming, when suddenly the whole vast bulk of him appeared not twenty feet away, broadside on the boat, and rolling from us. I fired point blank at his belly. The next minute or two must be left to imagination. All I remember is the hideous spectacle of that mighty rounded mass rolling towards me in a welter of bloody foam, and then a roar as of Niagara in my ears, followed by oblivion.

A painful return to being, as of groping blindly through interminable tunnels filled with the rush of many waters was my next sensation. And presently I realized that while I was among my boat mates, I was neither in any boat nor on board the ship. It really took some time for my scattered senses to form themselves upon the fact that I was on board of a



fled, one, fortunately for me occupying my humble position in the rear, plunging straight astern. Now it is an axiom that no matter how frightened a whale may be, if he has not finished the requisite number of "spoutings out" of breathings, he must rise to the surface to do so. And this proved to be my opportunity. For one of the fugitive leviathans, rising for his final spout, came within striking distance of us, only some six or seven fathoms away, his broad black side presenting a huge target. The marksman was not wanting. My splendid Kanaka made a pitch-pole dart, his harpoon curved singing through the air, and sank to the hitches in the whale's side. In a moment we were off at about fourteen knots, my heart singing with joy, and every man elate, triumphant. He ran us due east for miles, out of sight of the ship, apparently untirable, until at last I began to wonder whether, as it was impossible to get up on him, I dare risk all hands' lives longer.

Himself solved the problem by suddenly turning and rushing for me headlong. Well was it then for all of us that we had in Samuela a boat-steerer of finest calibre. Without word from me he swung the boat this way

whale. But my gallant harpooner soon explained the situation by telling me that all but me had dived deep when the whale rolled over on the boat, to find on rising to the surface no sign of their late craft, but instead the inert carcass of the whale. Samuela had but just succeeded in gaining a seat upon the body when he caught sight of me aloft but insensible. He immediately dived after me and aided by the rest managed to get me up on to the same precarious refuge afforded only by the fact that the broad side of the whale, just a little higher than the sea surface, was slightly hollowed, probably because of the explosion in the great cavity of his abdomen. Even then we could not have clambered up there I fear but for the fortunate circumstance of the harpoon and its attached line being upon that side.

But alas for our Christmas! We were hungry, for food had not passed our lips since 6 p.m. on the preceding day, nor any drink since 6 that morning, and it was now past noon by the look of the sun. Yet I doubt if to any of my mates the fact of its being Christmas day lent the added pang to the situation that it did for me. In aggravation of plain hunger and thirst I pictured the silent London suburban

streets pervaded by the smell of savory roastings and occasionally made musical by the sound of happy laughter bursting through close shut windows. I envied even the dolefully chanting beggars who always appear in such numbers on quiet streets on that day, for I knew what a rich harvest they were sure of directly. And meanwhile, the pitiless sun roasted us, our greasy refuge sent up a reek of stale oil, while all around the otherwise quiet waters foamed with the coming and going of hundreds of huge sharks using their utmost efforts to devour the enormous mass of food so suddenly thrown in their way. The albatrosses, mollymauks and other sea birds troubled us, too, by hovering closely above us, the albatross in particular, with his huge hooked beak, looking particularly dangerous. But nothing mattered soon except thirst. Those who have ever undergone privation of water when exposed to the direct rays of a burning sun will know what I mean, and to horrify those who do not by an attempt to describe our suffering, would be needless cruelty. Most gratefully do I record the blessed relief of a tremendous shower, a veritable cloudburst, which presently emptied out upon us masses of sweet, fresh water, filling the hollow in which we sat in a second and refreshing us beyond measure. When it passed we felt as if new life had been given us, we were drenched without and within with that absolute necessity of life—fresh water.

Samuela, ever ingenious and enterprising, then decided that he would have food as well as drink, and soon following his example all hands were vigorously digging with their sheath knives down through the thick envelope of blubber to the underlying muscle. Presently all of us were gnawing at chunks of black whale beef and laughing at the quaint meal. Our spirits had risen amazingly for the time, and when our jaws ached with chewing, we swapped yarns and even tried a song or two. But that exercise was a failure. For our voices sounded so pitifully feeble in that vast solitude, and moreover, none of us could keep eyes off the all too swiftly descending sun. Nor could our thoughts be diverted from the grim fact that the ship was nowhere to be seen.

The shadows lengthened, the air became cooler; all around us the terrible tumult among those ravening hordes of sea monsters increased, and the whole carcass trembled at their multitudinous assaults. Yet there was no word of complaint or of fear among us, motley crowd as we were; two Kanakas, two Portuguese, one American and one Englishman, all held our peace in the face of that last grim shadow of all.

Then came a blessed vision. Out of a lowering squall the ship emerged, haloed by the setting sun, beautiful beyond all knowledge, a mighty angel of deliverance, and we were saved.

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