

XX. IN A FOG HE IS SET TO WORK AS A BELL-TOLLER, AND BEHOLDS A
HERD OF
OCEAN-ELEPHANTS

What is this that we sail through? What palpable obscure? What smoke and reek, as if the whole steaming world were revolving on its axis, as a spit?

It is a Newfoundland Fog; and we are yet crossing the Grand Banks, wrapt in a mist, that no London in the Novem-berest November ever equaled. The chronometer pronounced it noon; but do you call this midnight or midday? So dense is the fog, that though we have a fair wind, we shorten sail for fear of accidents; and not only that, but here am I, poor Wellingborough, mounted aloft on a sort of belfry, the top of the "Sampson-Post," a lofty tower of timber, so called; and tolling the ship's bell, as if for a funeral.

This is intended to proclaim our approach, and warn all strangers from our track.

Dreary sound! toll, toll, toll, through the dismal mist and fog.

The bell is green with verdigris, and damp with dew; and the little cord attached to the clapper, by which I toll it, now and then slides through

my fingers, slippery with wet. Here I am, in my slouched black hat, like the "bull that could pull," announcing the decease of the lamented Cock-Robin.

A better device than the bell, however, was once pitched upon by an ingenious sea-captain, of whom I have heard. He had a litter of young porkers on board; and while sailing through the fog, he stationed men at both ends of the pen with long poles, wherewith they incessantly stirred up and irritated the porkers, who split the air with their squeals; and no doubt saved the ship, as the geese saved the Capitol.

The most strange and unheard-of noises came out of the fog at times: a vast sound of sighing and sobbing. What could it be? This would be followed by a spout, and a gush, and a cascading commotion, as if some fountain had suddenly jetted out of the ocean.

Seated on my Sampson-Post, I stared more and more, and suspended my duty as a sexton. But presently some one cried out--"There she blows! whales! whales close alongside!"

A whale! Think of it! whales close to me, Wellingborough;--would my own brother believe it? I dropt the clapper as if it were red-hot, and rushed to the side; and there, dimly floating, lay four or five long, black snaky-looking shapes, only a few inches out of the water.

Can these be whales? Monstrous whales, such as I had heard of? I thought

they would look like mountains on the sea; hills and valleys of flesh! regular krakens, that made it high tide, and inundated continents, when they descended to feed!

It was a bitter disappointment, from which I was long in recovering. I lost all respect for whales; and began to be a little dubious about the story of Jonah; for how could Jonah reside in such an insignificant tenement; how could he have had elbow-room there? But perhaps, thought I, the whale which according to Rabbinical traditions was a female one, might have expanded to receive him like an anaconda, when it swallows an elk and leaves the antlers sticking out of its mouth.

Nevertheless, from that day, whales greatly fell in my estimation.

But it is always thus. If you read of St. Peter's, they say, and then go and visit it, ten to one, you account it a dwarf compared to your high-raised ideal. And, doubtless, Jonah himself must have been disappointed when he looked up to the domed midriff surmounting the whale's belly, and surveyed the ribbed pillars around him. A pretty large belly, to be sure, thought he, but not so big as it might have been.

On the next day, the fog lifted; and by noon, we found ourselves sailing through fleets of fishermen at anchor. They were very small craft; and when I beheld them, I perceived the force of that sailor saying, intended to illustrate restricted quarters, or being on the limits. It

is like a fisherman's walk, say they, three steps and overboard.

Lying right in the track of the multitudinous ships crossing the ocean between England and America, these little vessels are sometimes run down, and obliterated from the face of the waters; the cry of the sailors ceasing with the last whirl of the whirlpool that closes over their craft. Their sad fate is frequently the result of their own remissness in keeping a good look-out by day, and not having their lamps trimmed, like the wise virgins, by night.

As I shall not make mention of the Grand Banks on our homeward-bound passage, I may as well here relate, that on our return, we approached them in the night; and by way of making sure of our whereabouts, the deep-sea-lead was heaved. The line attached is generally upward of three hundred fathoms in length; and the lead itself, weighing some forty or fifty pounds, has a hole in the lower end, in which, previous to sounding, some tallow is thrust, that it may bring up the soil at the bottom, for the captain to inspect. This is called "arming" the lead.

We "hove" our deep-sea-line by night, and the operation was very interesting, at least to me. In the first place, the vessel's heading was stopt; then, coiled away in a tub, like a whale-rope, the line was placed toward the after part of the quarter-deck; and one of the sailors carried the lead outside of the ship, away along to the end of the jib-boom, and at the word of command, far ahead and overboard it went, with a plunge; scraping by the side, till it came to the stern, when the

line ran out of the tub like light.

When we came to haul it up, I was astonished at the force necessary to perform the work. The whole watch pulled at the line, which was rove through a block in the mizzen-rigging, as if we were hauling up a fat porpoise. When the lead came in sight, I was all eagerness to examine the tallow, and get a peep at a specimen of the bottom of the sea; but the sailors did not seem to be much interested by it, calling me a fool for wanting to preserve a few grains of the sand.

I had almost forgotten to make mention of the Gulf Stream, in which we found ourselves previous to crossing the Banks. The fact, of our being in it was proved by the captain in person, who superintended the drawing of a bucket of salt water, in which he dipped his thermometer. In the absence of the Gulf-weed, this is the general test; for the temperature of this current is eight degrees higher than that of the ocean, and the temperature of the ocean is twenty degrees higher than that of the Grand Banks. And it is to this remarkable difference of temperature, for which there can be no equilibrium, that many seamen impute the fogs on the coast of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland; but why there should always be such ugly weather in the Gulf, is something that I do not know has ever been accounted for.

It is curious to dip one's finger in a bucket full of the Gulf Stream, and find it so warm; as if the Gulf of Mexico, from whence this current comes, were a great caldron or boiler, on purpose to keep warm the North

Atlantic, which is traversed by it for a distance of two thousand miles, as some large halls in winter are by hot air tubes. Its mean breadth being about two hundred leagues, it comprises an area larger than that of the whole Mediterranean, and may be deemed a sort of Mississippi of hot water flowing through the ocean; off the coast of Florida, running at the rate of one mile and a half an hour.

XXI. A WHALEMAN AND A MAN-OF-WAR'S-MAN

The sight of the whales mentioned in the preceding chapter was the bringing out of Larry, one of our crew, who hitherto had been quite silent and reserved, as if from some conscious inferiority, though he had shipped as an ordinary seaman, and, for aught I could see, performed his duty very well.

When the men fell into a dispute concerning what kind of whales they were which we saw, Larry stood by attentively, and after garnering in their ignorance, all at once broke out, and astonished every body by his intimate acquaintance with the monsters.

"They ar'n't sperm whales," said Larry, "their spouts ar'n't bushy enough; they ar'n't Sulphur-bottoms, or they wouldn't stay up so long;