



TOWED BY A WHALE.

ON the 25th of June, 1812 (says Captain Scoresby), one of the harpooners belonging to the *Resolution*, of Whitby, under my command, struck a whale by the edge of a small floe of ice; assistance being promptly afforded, a second boat's lines were attached to those of the fast-boat in a few minutes after the harpoon was discharged; the remainder of the boats proceeded to some distance in the direction which the fish seemed to have taken. In about a quarter of an hour, the fast-boat, to my surprise, again made a signal for lines. As the ship was then within five minutes' sail, we instantly steered towards the boat, with the view of affording assistance by means of a spare boat we still retained on board. Before we reached the place, however, we observed four oars displayed in signal order, which, by their number, indicated a most urgent necessity for assistance. Two or three men were at the same time seen seated close by the stern, which was considerably elevated, for the purpose of keeping it down, while the bow of the boat, by the force of the line, was drawn down to the level of the sea, and the harpooner, by the friction of the line round the bollard, was enveloped in smoky obscurity. At length, when the ship was scarcely one hundred yards distant, we perceived preparations for quitting the boat. The sailors' pea-jackets were cast upon the adjoining ice; the oars were thrown down; the crew leaped overboard; the bow of the boat was buried in the water; the stern rose perpendicularly, and then majestically disappeared. The harpooner having caused the end of the line to be fastened to the iron ring at the boat's stern

was the means of its loss; and a *tongue* of the ice, on which was a depth of several feet of water, kept the boat, by the pressure of the line against it, at such a considerable distance as prevented the crew from leaping upon the floe. Some of them were therefore put to the necessity of swimming for their preservation, but all of them succeeded in scrambling upon the ice, and were taken on board the ship in a few minutes. It may be here observed, that it is an uncommon circumstance for a fish to require more than two boats' lines in such a situation; none of our harpooners, therefore, had any scruple in leaving the fast-boat, never suspecting, after it had received the assistance of one boat with six lines, or upward, that it would need any more.

Several ships being about us, there was a possibility that some person might attack and make a prize of the whale, when it had so far escaped us that we no longer retained any hold of it; as such, we set all sail the ship could safely sustain, and worked through several narrow and intricate channels in the ice in the direction I observed the fish had retreated. After a little time, it was descried by the people in the boats at a considerable distance to the eastward; a general chase immediately commenced, and within the space of an hour three harpoons were struck. We now imagined that the fish was secure, but our expectations were quite premature. The whale resolutely pushed beneath a large floe that had been recently broken to pieces by the swell, and soon drew all the lines out of the second fast-boat, the officer of which, not being able to get any assistance, tied the end of his line to a hummock of ice and broke it. Soon afterwards, the other two boats, still

fast, were dragged against the broken floe, when one of the harpoons drew out. The lines of only one boat, therefore, remained fast to the fish, and this, with six or eight lines out, was dragged forward into the shattered floe with astonishing force. Pieces of ice, each of which were sufficiently large to have answered the purpose of a mooring for the ship, were wheeled about by the strength of the whale; and such was the tension and elasticity of the line, that whenever it slipped clear of any mass of ice, after turning it round into the space between any two adjoining pieces, the boat and its crew flew forward through the crack with the velocity of an arrow, and never failed to launch several feet upon the first mass of ice that it encountered.

While we scoured the sea around the broken floe of the ship, and while the ice was attempted in vain by the boats, the whale continued to press forward in an easterly direction towards the sea. At length, when fourteen lines, about 1,680 fathoms, were drawn from the fourth fast-boat, a slight entanglement of the line broke it at the stern. The fish again made its escape, taking along with it a boat and twenty-eight lines. The united length of the lines was 6,720 yards, or upwards of three English miles and three-quarters—value, with the boat, above £150 sterling. The obstruction of the sunken boat to the progress of the fish must have been immense, and that of the lines likewise considerable, the weight of the lines alone being thirty-five hundred-weight. So long as the fourth fast-boat, through the medium of its lines, retained its hold of the fish, we searched the adjoining sea with the ship in vain, but in a short time after the line was divided we got sight of the object of pursuit at the distance of near two miles to the eastward of the ice and boats, in the open sea. One boat only with lines, and two empty boats, were reserved by the ship.

Having, however, happily fine weather and a breeze of wind, we immediately gave chase under all sail, though it must be confessed, with the insignificant force by us, the distance of the fish, and the rapidity of its flight considered, we had but very small hopes of success. At length, after pursuing it five or six miles, being at least nine miles from the place where it was struck, we came up with it, and it seemed inclined to rest after its extraordinary exertion. The two dismantled or empty boats having been furnished with two lines each (a very inadequate supply), they, together with the one in good state of equipment, now made an attack upon the whale. One of the harpooners made a blunder; the fish saw the boat, took the alarm, and again fled. I now supposed it would be seen no more; nevertheless, we chased nearly a mile in the direction I imagined it had taken, and placed the boats to the best of my judgment in the most advantageous situations. In this instance we were extremely successful. The fish rose near one of the boats, and was immediately harpooned. In a few minutes, two more harpoons entered its back, and lances were plied against it with vigour and success. Exhausted by its amazing exertions to escape, it yielded itself at length to its fate, received the piercing wounds of the lances without resistance, and finally died without a struggle. After all, it may seem surprising that it was not a particularly large individual, the largest lamina of whalebone only measuring nine feet six inches, while those affording twelve-foot bone are not uncommon. The quantity of line withdrawn from the different boats engaged in the capture was singularly great. It amounted altogether to 10,440 yards, or nearly six English miles. Of these, thirteen new lines were lost, together with the sunken boat, the harpoon connecting them with the fish having dropped out before the whale was killed. And thus terminated with

success an attack upon a whale, which exhibited the most uncommon determination to escape from its pursuers, seconded by the most amazing strength of any individual whose capture I ever witnessed.

When engaged in the pursuit of a large whale, it is a necessary precaution for two boats at all times to proceed in company, that the one may be able to assist the other on any emergency. With this principle in view, two boats from the *Esk* were sent out in chase of some large whales, on the 13th of June, 1814. No ice was within sight, the boats had proceeded some time together, when they separated in pursuit of two whales, not far distant from each other, when, by a singular coincidence, the harpooners each struck his fish at the same moment. They were a mile from the ship. Urgent signals for assistance were immediately displayed by each boat, and in a few minutes one of the harpooners was under the necessity of slipping the end of his line. Happily, the other fish did not descend so deep, and the lines in the boat proved adequate to the occasion. One of the fish being then supposed to be lost, five of the boats, out of seven, attended on the fish which yet remained entangled, and speedily killed it. A short time afterwards, the other fish, supposed to be irrecoverably lost, was descried at a little distance from the place where it was struck; three boats proceeded against it; it was immediately struck, and in twenty minutes also killed. Thus were successfully captured two whales, both of which had been despaired of. They produced us near forty tuns of oil, value at that time £1,400. The lines attached to the fish last killed were recovered in a remarkable manner. The harpooners were busily engaged in attempting to secure them, when the harpoon, by which alone they were prevented from sinking, slipped out; but as it descended in the water, it luckily hooked another line, and both harpoon and lines were preserved.

It is very generally believed by the whalers, that fish have occasionally been struck, which, by sudden extension or heave of the body, have instantly disengaged themselves from the harpoon. This usually happens when the whale is struck "with a slack back," as that position of the fish is denominated, in which the back being depressed the flesh is relaxed. A harpoon then struck occasions an uncommon wound. Hence, if the fish suddenly extends itself and elevates its back, the wound appears of twice the size of the harpoon, and consequently the weapon is capable of being thrown out by the jerk of the body. Under such circumstances as these, a large whale was struck by a harpooner belonging to the ship *Howe*, of Shields. The fish extending and lifting its back with uncommon violence, the harpoon was disengaged and projected high into the air, when, at the same moment, the fish rolled over upon its back, and received the point of the falling weapon in its belly, whereby it was captured and caught. This circumstance, romantic as it may appear, is so well authenticated by the person who struck the fish, together with others who were in the boat at the same time, and were witnesses of the fact, that I have no scruple in believing it.

On the 28th of May, 1817, the *Royal Bounty*, of Leith, Captain Drysdale, fell in with a great number of whales. Neither ice nor land was in sight, nor was there supposed to be either the one or the other within fifty or sixty miles. A brisk breeze of wind prevailed, and the weather was clear. The boats were therefore manned and sent in pursuit. After a chase of about five hours, the harpooner, commanding a boat, who, with another in company, had rowed out of sight of the ship, struck one of the whales. This was about four A.M. of the 29th. The captain, supposing from the long absence of the two most distant boats that a fish had been struck, directed

the course of the ship towards the place where he had last seen them, and about eight A.M. he got sight of a boat which displayed the signal for being *fast*.

Some time afterwards, he observed the other boat approach the fish, a second harpoon struck, and the usual signal displayed. As, however, the fish dragged the two boats away with considerable speed, it was midday before any assistance could reach them. Two more harpoons were then struck, but such was the vigour of the whale that, although it constantly dragged through the water four to six boats, together with a length of 1,600 fathoms of line which it had drawn out of the different boats, yet it pursued its flight nearly as fast as a boat could row, and such was the terror that it manifested on the approach of its enemies, that, whenever a boat passed beyond its tail, it invariably dived. All their endeavours to lance it were therefore in vain.

The crews of the loose boats being unable to keep pace with the fish, caught hold of and moored themselves to the fast-boats; and for some hours afterwards, all hands were constrained to sit in idle impatience, waiting for some relaxation in the speed of the whale. Its most general course had hitherto been to windward, but a favourable change taking place, enabled the ship, which had previously been at a great distance, to join the boats at eight P.M. They succeeded in tacking one of the lines to the ship which was fast to the fish, with a view of retarding its flight. They then furled the top-gallant sails, and lowered the topsails; but after supporting the ship a few minutes head to wind, the wither of the harpoon upset or twisted aside, and the instrument was disengaged from its grasp. The whale immediately set off to windward with increased speed, and it required an interval of three hours before the ship could again approach it. Another line was then taken on board, which immediately broke. A fifth har-

poon had previously been struck, to replace the one which had been pulled out, but the line attached to it was soon afterwards cut. They then instituted various schemes for arresting the speed of the fish, which occupied their close attention nearly two hours. But its velocity was yet such, that the master, who had himself proceeded to the attack, was unable to approach sufficiently near to strike a harpoon. After a long chase, however, he succeeded in getting hold of one of the lines which the fish dragged after it, and in fastening another line to it. The fish then happily turned towards the ship, which was a considerable distance to leeward.

At four P.M. of the 30th, thirty-six hours after the fish had been struck, the ship again joined the boats, when, by a successful manœuvre, they secured two of the fast lines on board. The wind blowing a moderately brisk breeze, the top-gallant sails were taken in, the courses hauled up, and the topsails clewed down, but, notwithstanding the resistance a ship thus situated must necessarily offer, she was towed by the fish directly to windward with the velocity of at least one-half to two knots during an hour and a-half; and then, though the whale must have been greatly exhausted, it beat the water with its fins and tail in so tremendous a way, that the sea around was in a continual foam, and the most hardy of the sailors scarcely dared to approach it. At length, about eight P.M., after forty hours of almost incessant, and for the most part fruitless exertion, this formidable and astonishing animal was killed. The capture and the flensing occupied forty-eight hours. The fish was eleven feet four inches in bone (the length of the longest lamina of whalebone), and its produce filled forty-seven butts, or twenty-three and a-half tun casks, with blubber.

A remarkable instance of the power which the whale possesses in its tail was exhibited within my own observation, in

the year 1807. On the 29th of May, a whale was harpooned by an officer belonging to the *Resolution*. It descended a considerable depth, and on its re-appearance evidenced an uncommon degree of irritation. It made such a display of its fins and tail, that few of the crew were hardy enough to approach it. The captain (my father), observing their timidity, called a boat, and himself struck the second harpoon. Another boat immediately followed, and, unhappily, advanced too far. The tail was again reared into the air in a terrific attitude. The impending blow was evident. The harpooner, who was directly underneath, leaped overboard. At the next moment, the threatened stroke was impressed on the centre of the boat, which buried it in the water. Happily no one was even bruised or injured.

The harpooner, who leaped overboard, escaped certain death by the act, the tail having struck the very spot on which he stood. The effects of the blow were astonishing. The keel was broken, the gunwales and every plank, excepting two, were cut through, and it was evident the boat would have been completely divided had not the tail struck directly upon a coil of lines. The boat was rendered useless.

In one of my earliest voyages to the whale-fishery, I observed a circumstance which excited my highest astonishment. One of our harpooners had struck a whale; it dived, and all the assisting boats had collected round the fast-boat before it rose to the surface. The first boat which approached it advanced incautiously upon it. It rose with unexpected violence beneath the boat, and projected it and all its crew to the height of some yards in the air. It fell on its side, upset, and cast all the men into the water. One

man received a severe blow in his fall, and appeared to be dangerously injured; but soon after his arrival on board of the ship, he recovered from the effects of the accident. The rest of the boat's crew escaped without any hurt.

Captain Lyons, of the *Raith*, of Leith, while prosecuting the whale-fishery on the Labrador coast, in the season of 1802, discovered a large whale at a short distance from the ship. Four boats were dispatched in pursuit, and two of them succeeded in approaching it so closely together, that two harpoons were struck at the same moment. The fish descended a few fathoms in the direction of another of the boats, which was on the advance, rose accidentally beneath it, struck it with its head, and threw the boat, men, and apparatus, about fifteen feet into the air. It was inverted by the stroke, and fell into the water with its keel upwards. All the people were picked up alive by the fourth boat, which was just at hand, excepting one man, who, having got entangled in the boat, fell beneath it and was drowned. The fish was soon afterwards killed.

The skin of the whale is devoid of hair, and is of rather peculiar structure, as is needful to enable it to resist the enormous pressure to which it is constantly subjected at the vast depths to which the animal descends. The blubber, indeed, is nothing more than the true skin, which is composed of a number of interlacing fibres capable of containing a very great amount of oily matter. This blubber is never less than several inches in thickness, and in many places is really two feet deep, and as elastic as caoutchouc, offering an admirable resistance to the force of the waves and the pressure of the water. In a large whale the blubber will weigh thirty tons.
