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BALLANTYNE

FIGHTING THE WHALES

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Fighting the Whales

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R. M. Ballantyne

Fighting the Whales

CHAPTER I

IN TROUBLE, TO BEGIN WITH

There are few things in this world that have filled me with so much astonishment as the fact that man can kill a whale! That a fish, more than sixty feet long, and thirty feet round the body; with the bulk of three hundred fat oxen rolled into one; with the strength of many hundreds of horses; able to swim at a rate that would carry it right round the world in twenty-three days; that can smash a boat to atoms with one slap of its tail, and stave in the planks of a ship with one blow of its thick skull;—that such a monster can be caught and killed by man, is most wonderful to hear of, but I can tell from experience that it is much more wonderful to see.

There is a wise saying which I have often thought much upon. It is this: "Knowledge is power". Man is but a feeble creature, and if he had to depend on his own bodily strength alone he could make no head against even the ordinary brutes in this world. But the knowledge which has been given to him by his Maker has clothed man with great power, so that he is more than a match for the fiercest beast in the forest, or the largest fish in the sea. Yet, with all his knowledge, with all his experience, and all his power, the killing of a great old sperm whale costs man a long, tough battle, sometimes it even costs him his life.

It is a long time now since I took to fighting the whales. I have been at it, man and boy, for nigh forty years, and many a wonderful sight have I seen; many a desperate battle have I fought in the fisheries of the North and South Seas.

Sometimes, when I sit in the chimney-corner of a winter evening, smoking my pipe with my old messmate Tom Lokins, I stare into the fire and think of the days gone by till I forget where I am, and go on thinking so hard that the flames seem to turn into melting fires, and the bars of the grate into dead fish, and the smoke into sails and rigging, and I go to work cutting up the blubber and stirring the oil-pots, or pulling the bow-oar and driving the harpoon at such a rate that I can't help giving a shout, which causes Tom to start and cry:

"Hallo! Bob" (my name is Bob Ledbury, you see). "Hallo! Bob, wot's the matter?"

To which I reply, "Tom, can it all be true?"

"Can *wot* be true?" says he, with a stare of surprise—for Tom is getting into his dotage now.

And then I chuckle and tell him I was only thinking of old times, and so he falls to smoking again, and I to staring at the fire, and thinking as hard as ever.

The way in which I was first led to go after the whales was curious. This is how it happened.

About forty years ago, when I was a boy of nearly fifteen years of age, I lived with my mother in one of the seaport towns of England. There was great distress in the town at that time, and many of the hands were out of work. My employer, a blacksmith, had just died, and for more than six weeks I had not been able to get employment or to earn a farthing. This caused me great distress, for my father had died without leaving a penny in the world, and my mother depended on me entirely. The money I had saved out of my wages was soon spent, and one morning when I sat down to breakfast, my mother looked across the table and said, in a thoughtful voice:

"Robert, dear, this meal has cost us our last halfpenny."

My mother was old and frail, and her voice very gentle; she was the most trustful, uncomplaining woman I ever knew.

I looked up quickly into her face as she spoke. "All the money gone, Mother?"

"Aye, all. It will be hard for you to go without your dinner, Robert, dear."

"It will be harder for *you*, Mother," I cried, striking the table with my fist; then a lump rose in my throat and almost choked me. I could not utter another word.

It was with difficulty I managed to eat the little food that was before me. After breakfast I rose hastily and rushed out of the house, determined that I would get my mother her dinner, even if I should have to beg for it. But I must confess that a sick feeling came over me when I thought of begging.

Hurrying along the crowded streets without knowing very well what I meant to do, I at last came to an abrupt halt at the end of the pier. Here I went up to several people and offered my services in a wild sort of way. They must have thought that I was drunk, for nearly all of them said gruffly that they did not want me.

Dinner-time drew near, but no one had given me a job, and no wonder, for the way in which I tried to get one was not likely to be successful. At last I resolved to beg. Observing a fat, red-faced old gentleman coming along the pier, I made up to him boldly. He carried a cane with a large gold knob on the top of it. That gave me hope, "for of course," thought I, "he must be rich." His nose, which was exactly the colour and shape of the gold knob on his cane, was stuck in the centre of a round, good-natured countenance, the mouth of which was large and firm; the eyes bright and blue. He frowned as I went forward hat in hand; but I was not to be driven back; the thought of my starving mother gave me power to crush down my rising shame. Yet I had no reason to be ashamed. I was willing to work, if only I could have got employment.

Stopping in front of the old gentleman, I was about to speak when I observed him quietly button up his breeches pocket. The blood rushed to my face, and, turning quickly on my heel, I walked away without uttering a word.

"Hallo!" shouted a gruff voice just as I was moving away.

I turned, and observed that the shout was uttered by a broad rough-looking jack-tar, a man of about two or three and thirty, who had been sitting all the forenoon on an old cask smoking his pipe and basking in the sun.

"Hallo!" said he again.

"Well," said I.

"Wot d'ye mean, youngster, by goin' on in that there fashion all the mornin', a-botherin' everybody, and makin' a fool o' yourself like that? eh!"

"What's that to you?" said I savagely, for my heart was sore and heavy, and I could not stand the interference of a stranger.

"Oh! it's nothin' to me of course," said the sailor, picking his pipe quietly with his clasp-knife; "but come here, boy, I've somethin' to say to ye."

"Well, what is it?" said I, going up to him somewhat sulkily.

The man looked at me gravely through the smoke of his pipe, and said, "You're in a passion, my young buck, that's all; and, in case you didn't know it, I thought I'd tell ye."

I burst into a fit of laughter. "Well, I believe you're not far wrong; but I'm better now."

"Ah! that's right," said the sailor, with an approving nod of his head; "always confess when you're in the wrong. Now, younker, let me give you a bit of advice. Never get into a passion if you can help it, and if you can't help it get out of it as fast as possible, and if you can't get out of it, just give a great roar to let off the steam and turn about and run. There's nothing like that. Passion han't got legs. It can't hold on to a feller when he's runnin'. If you keep it up till you a'most split your timbers, passion has no chance. It *must* go a-starn. Now, lad, I've been watchin' ye all the mornin', and I see there's a screw loose somewhere. If you'll tell me wot it is, see if I don't help you!"

The kind frank way in which this was said quite won my heart, so I sat down on the old cask, and told the sailor all my sorrows.

"Boy," said he, when I had finished, "I'll put you in the way o' helpin' your mother. I can get you a berth in my ship, if you're willin' to take a trip to the whale fishery of the South Seas."

"And who will look after my mother when I'm away?" said I.

The sailor looked perplexed at the question.

"Ah! that's a puzzler," he replied, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "Will you take me to your mother's house, lad?"

"Willingly," said I, and, jumping up, I led the way. As we turned to go, I observed that the old gentleman with the gold-headed cane was leaning over the rail of the pier at a short distance from us. A feeling of anger instantly rose within me, and I exclaimed, loud enough for him to hear:

"I do believe that stingy old chap has been listening to every word we've been saying!"

I thought I observed a frown on the sailor's brow as I said this, but he made no remark, and in a few minutes we were walking rapidly through the streets. My companion stopped at one of those stores so common in seaport towns, where one can buy almost anything, from a tallow candle to a brass cannon. Here he

[Transcriber's note: two pages missing from book]

I've got neither family nor friends, and I'm bound for the South Seas in six days; so, if you'll take it, you're welcome to it, and if your son Bob can manage to cast loose from you without leaving you to sink, I'll take him aboard the ship that I sail in. He'll always find me at the Bull and Griffin, in the High Street, or at the end o' the pier."

While the sailor was speaking, I observed a figure standing in a dark corner of the room near the door, and, on looking more closely, I found that it was the old gentleman with the nose like his cane knob. Seeing that he was observed, he came forward and said:

"I trust that you will forgive my coming here without invitation; but I happened to overhear part of the conversation between your son and this seaman, and I am willing to help you over your little difficulty, if you will allow me."

The old gentleman said this in a very quick, abrupt way, and looked as if he were afraid his offer might be refused. He was much heated, with climbing our long stair no doubt, and as he stood in the middle of the room, puffing and wiping his bald head with a handkerchief, my mother rose hastily and offered him a chair.

"You are very kind, sir," she said; "do sit down, sir. I'm sure I don't know why you should take so much trouble. But, dear me, you are very warm; will you take a cup of tea to cool you?"

"Thank you, thank you. With much pleasure, unless, indeed, your son objects to a '*stingy old chap*' sitting beside him."

I blushed when he repeated my words, and attempted to make some apology; but the old gentleman stopped me by commencing to explain his intentions in short, rapid sentences.

To make a long story short, he offered to look after my mother while I was away, and, to prove his sincerity, laid down five shillings, and said he would call with that sum every week as long as I was absent. My mother, after some trouble, agreed to let me go, and, before that evening closed, everything was arranged, and the gentleman, leaving his address, went away.

The sailor had been so much filled with surprise at the suddenness of all this, that he could scarcely speak. Immediately after the departure of the old gentleman, he said, "Well, good-bye, mistress, good-bye, Bob," and throwing on his hat in a careless way, left the room.

"Stop!" I shouted after him, when he had got about half-way down stair.

"Hallo! wot's wrong now?"

"Nothing; I only forgot to ask your name."

"Tom Lokins," he bellowed, in the hoarse voice of a regular boatswain, "w'ich was my father's name before me."

So saying, he departed, whistling "Rule, Britannia," with all his might.

Thus the matter was settled. Six days afterwards, I rigged myself out in a blue jacket, white ducks, and a straw hat, and went to sea.

CHAPTER II

AT SEA

My first few days on the ocean were so miserable that I oftentimes repented of having left my native land. I was, as my new friend Tom Lokins said, as sick as a dog. But in course of time I grew well, and began to rejoice in the cool fresh breezes and the great rolling billows of the sea.

Many and many a time I used to creep out to the end of the bowsprit, when the weather was calm, and sit with my legs dangling over the deep blue water, and my eyes fixed on the great masses of rolling clouds in the sky, thinking of the new course of life I had just begun. At such times the thought of my mother was sure to come into my mind, and I thought of her parting words, "Put your trust in the Lord, Robert, and read His Word." I resolved to try to obey her, but this I found was no easy matter, for the sailors were a rough lot of fellows, who cared little for the Bible. But, I must say, they were a hearty, good-natured set, and much better, upon the whole, than many a ship's crew that I afterwards sailed with.

We were fortunate in having fair winds this voyage, and soon found ourselves on the other side of the *line*, as we jack-tars call the Equator.

Of course the crew did not forget the old custom of shaving all the men who had never crossed the line before. Our captain was a jolly old man, and uncommonly fond of "sky-larking". He gave us leave to do what we liked the day we crossed the line; so, as there were a number of wild spirits among us, we broke through all the ordinary rules, or, rather, we added on new rules to them.

The old hands had kept the matter quiet from us greenhorns, so that, although we knew they were going to do some sort of mischief, we didn't exactly understand what it was to be.

About noon of that day I was called on deck and told that old father Neptune was coming aboard, and we were to be ready to receive him. A minute after I saw a tremendous monster come up over the side of the ship and jump on the deck. He was crowned with seaweed, and painted in a wonderful fashion; his clothes were dripping wet, as if he had just come from the bottom of the sea. After him came another monster with a petticoat made of sailcloth and a tippet of a bit of old tarpaulin. This was Neptune's wife, and these two carried on the most remarkable antics I ever saw. I laughed heartily, and soon discovered, from the tones of their voices, which of my shipmates Neptune and his wife were. But my mirth was quickly stopped when I was suddenly seized by several men, and my face was covered over with a horrible mixture of tar and grease!

Six of us youngsters were treated in this way; then the lather was scraped off with a piece of old hoop-iron, and, after being thus shaved, buckets of cold water were thrown over us.

At last, after a prosperous voyage, we arrived at our fishing-ground in the South Seas, and a feeling of excitement and expectation began to show itself among the men, insomuch that our very eyes seemed brighter than usual.

One night those of us who had just been relieved from watch on deck were sitting on the lockers down below telling ghost stories.

It was a dead calm, and one of those intensely dark, hot nights, that cause sailors to feel uneasy, they scarce know why. I began to feel so uncomfortable at last, listening to the horrible tales which Tom Lokins was relating to the men, that I slipt away from them with the intention of going on deck. I moved so quietly that no one observed me; besides, every eye was fixed earnestly on Tom, whose deep low voice was the only sound that broke the stillness of all around. As I was going very cautiously up the ladder leading to the deck, Tom had reached that part of his story where the ghost was just appearing in a dark churchyard, dressed in white, and coming slowly forward, one step at a time, towards the terrified man who saw it. The men held their breath, and one or two of their faces turned pale as Tom went on with his description, lowering his voice to a hoarse whisper. Just as I put my

head up the hatchway the sheet of one of the sails, which was hanging loose in the still air, passed gently over my head and knocked my hat off. At any other time I would have thought nothing of this, but Tom's story had thrown me into such an excited and nervous condition that I gave a start, missed my footing, uttered a loud cry, and fell down the ladder right in among the men with a tremendous crash, knocking over two or three oil-cans and a tin bread-basket in my fall, and upsetting the lantern, so that the place was instantly pitch-dark.

I never heard such a howl of terror as these men gave vent to when this misfortune befell me. They rushed upon deck with their hearts in their mouths, tumbling, and peeling the skin off their shins and knuckles in their haste; and it was not until they heard the laughter of the watch on deck that they breathed freely, and, joining in the laugh, called themselves fools for being frightened by a ghost story. I noticed, however, that, for all their pretended indifference, there was not one man among them—not even Tom Lokins himself—who would go down below to relight the lantern for at least a quarter of an hour afterwards!

Feeling none the worse for my fall, I went forward and leaned over the bow of the ship, where I was much astonished by the appearance of the sea. It seemed as if the water was on fire. Every time the ship's bow rose and fell, the little belt of foam made in the water seemed like a belt of blue flame with bright sparkles in it, like stars or diamonds. I had seen this curious appearance before, but never so bright as it was on that night.

"What is it, Tom?" said I, as my friend came forward and leaned over the ship's bulwark beside me.

"It's blue fire, Bob," replied Tom, as he smoked his pipe calmly.

"Come, you know I can't swallow that," said I; "everybody knows that fire, either blue or red, can't burn in the water."

"Maybe not," returned Tom; "but it's blue fire for all that. Leastwise if it's not, I don't know wot else it is."

Tom had often seen this light before, no doubt, but he had never given himself the trouble to find out what it could be. Fortunately the captain came up just as I put the question, and he enlightened me on the subject.

"It is caused by small animals," said he, leaning over the side.

"Small animals!" said I, in astonishment.

"Aye; many parts of the sea are full of creatures so small and so thin and colourless, that you can hardly see them even in a clear glass tumbler. Many of them are larger than others, but the most of them are very small."

"But how do they shine like that, sir?" I asked.

"That I do not know, boy. God has given them the power to shine, just as he has given us the power to walk or speak; and they do shine brightly, as you see; but how they do it is more than I can tell. I think, myself, it must be anger that makes them shine, for they generally do it when they are stirred up or knocked about by oars, or ships' keels, or tumbling waves. But I am not sure that that's the reason either, because, you know, we often sail through them without seeing the light, though of course they must be there."

"P'r'aps, sir," said Tom Lokins; "p'r'aps, sir, they're sleepy sometimes, an' can't be bothered gettin' angry."

"Perhaps!" answered the captain, laughing. "But then again, at other times, I have seen them shining over the whole sea when it was quite calm, making it like an ocean of milk; and nothing was disturbing them at that time, d'ye see."

"I don't know *that*," objected Tom; "they might have bin a-fightin' among theirselves."

"Or playing, maybe," said I.

The captain laughed, and, looking up at the sky, said: "I don't like the look of the weather, Tom Lokins. You're a sharp fellow, and have been in these seas before; what say you?"

"We'll have a breeze," replied Tom, briefly.

"More than a breeze," muttered the captain, while a look of grave anxiety overspread his countenance; "I'll go below and take a squint at the glass."

"What does he mean by that, Tom?" said I, when the captain was gone; "I never saw a calmer or a finer night. Surely there is no chance of a storm just now."

"Aye, that shows that you're a young feller, and han't got much experience o' them seas," replied my companion. "Why, boy, sometimes the fiercest storm is brewin' behind the greatest calm. An' the worst o' the thing is that it comes so sudden at times, that the masts are torn out o' the ship before you can say Jack Robinson."

"What! and without any warning?" said I.

"Aye, *almost* without warnin'; but not *altogether* without it. You heer'd the captain say he'd go an' take a squint at the glass?"

"Yes; what is the glass?"

"It's not a glass o' grog, you may be sure; nor yet a lookin'-glass. It's the weather-glass, boy. Shore-goin' chaps call it a barometer."

"And what's the meaning of barometer?" I enquired earnestly.

Tom Lokins stared at me in stupid amazement. "Why, boy," said he, "you're too inquisitive. I once asked the doctor o' a ship that question, and says he to me, 'Tom,' says he, 'a barometer is a glass tube filled with quicksilver or mercury, which is a metal in a soft or fluid state, like water, you know, and it's meant for tellin' the state o' the weather.'

"Yes, sir,' I answers, 'I know that well enough.'

"Then why did you ask?' says he, gettin' into a passion.

"I asked what was the meanin' o' the *word* barometer, sir,' said I.

"The doctor he looked grave at that, and shook his head. 'Tom,' says he, 'if I was to go for to explain that word, and all about the instrument, in a scientific sort o' way, d'ye see, I'd have to sit here an' speak to you right on end for six hours or more.'

"Oh, sir,' says I, 'don't do it, then. *Please*, don't do it.'

"No more I will,' says he; 'but it'll serve your turn to know that a barometer is a glass for measurin' the weight o' the air, and, *somehow or other*, that lets ye know wot's a-coming. If the mercury in the glass rises high, all's right. If it falls uncommon low very sudden, look out for squalls; that's all. No matter how smooth the sea may be, or how sweetly all natur' may smile, don't you believe it; take in every inch o' canvas at once.'"

"That was a queer explanation, Tom."

"Aye, but it was a true one, as you shall see before long."

As I looked out upon the calm sea, which lay like a sheet of glass, without a ripple on its surface, I could scarcely believe what he had said. But before many minutes had passed I was convinced of my error.

While I was standing talking to my messmate, the captain rushed on deck, and shouted:

"All hands tumble up! Shorten sail! Take in every rag! Look alive, boys, look alive."

I was quite stunned for a moment by this, and by the sudden tumult that followed. The men, who seemed never to take thought about anything, and who had but one duty, namely, to *obey orders*, ran upon deck, and leaped up the rigging like cats; the sheets of nearly all the principal sails were clewed up, and, ere long, the canvas was made fast to the yards. A few of the smaller sails only were left exposed, and even these were close-reefed. Before long a loud roar was heard, and in another minute the storm burst upon us with terrific violence. The ship at first lay over so much that the masts were almost in the water, and it was as impossible for anyone to walk the deck as to walk along the side of a wall. At the same time, the sea was lashed into white foam, and the blinding spray flew over us in bitter fury.

"Take in the topsails!" roared the captain. But his voice was drowned in the shriek of the gale. The men were saved the risk of going out on the yards, however, for in a few moments more all the sails, except the storm-trysail, were burst and blown to ribbons.

We now tried to put the ship's head to the wind and "lay to", by which landsmen will understand that we tried to face the storm, and remain stationary. But the gale was so fierce that this was impossible. The last rag of sail was blown away, and then there was nothing left for us but to show our stern to the gale, and "scud under bare poles".

The great danger now was that we might be "pooped", which means that a huge wave might curl over our stern, fall with terrible fury on our deck, and sink us.

Many and many a good ship has gone down in this way; but we were mercifully spared. As our safety depended very much on good steering, the captain himself took the wheel, and managed the ship so well, that we weathered the gale without damage, further than the loss of a few sails and light spars. For two days the storm howled furiously, the sky and sea were like ink, with sheets of rain and foam driving through the air, and raging billows tossing our ship about like a cork.

During all this time my shipmates were quiet and grave, but active and full of energy, so that every order was at once obeyed without noise or confusion. Every man watched the slightest motion of the captain. We all felt that everything depended on him.

As for me, I gave up all hope of being saved. It seemed impossible to me that anything that man could build could withstand so terrible a storm. I do not pretend to say that I was not afraid. The near prospect of a violent death caused my heart to sink more than once; but my feelings did not unman me. I did my duty quietly, but quickly, like the rest; and when I had no work to do, I stood holding on to the weather stanchions, looking at the raging sea, and thinking of my mother, and of the words of kindness and counsel she had so often bestowed upon me in vain.

The storm ceased almost as quickly as it began, and although the sea did not all at once stop the heavings of its angry bosom, the wind fell entirely in the course of a few hours, the dark clouds broke up into great masses that were piled up high into the sky, and out of the midst of these the glorious sun shone in bright rays down on the ocean, like comfort from heaven, gladdening our hearts as we busily repaired the damage that we had suffered from the storm.

CHAPTER III

OUR FIRST BATTLE

I shall never forget the surprise I got the first time I saw a whale.

It was in the forenoon of a most splendid day, about a week after we arrived at that part of the ocean where we might expect to find fish. A light nor'-east breeze was blowing, but it scarcely ruffled the sea, as we crept slowly through the water with every stitch of canvas set.

As we had been looking out for fish for some time past, everything was in readiness for them. The boats were hanging over the side ready to lower, tubs for coiling away the ropes, harpoons, lances, &c., all were ready to throw in, and start away at a moment's notice. The man in the "crow's-nest", as they call the cask fixed up at the masthead, was looking anxiously out for whales, and the crew were idling about the deck. Tom Lokins was seated on the windlass smoking his pipe, and I was sitting beside him on an empty cask, sharpening a blubber-knife.

"Tom," said I, "what like is a whale?"

"Why, it's like nothin' but itself," replied Tom, looking puzzled. "Why, wot a queer feller you are to ax questions."

"I'm sure you've seen plenty of them. You might be able to tell what a whale is like."

"Wot it's like! Well, it's like a tremendous big bolster with a head and a tail to it."

"And how big is it?"

"They're of all sizes, lad. I've seen one that was exactly equal to three hundred fat bulls, and its rate of goin' would take it round the whole world in twenty-three days."

"I don't believe you," said I, laughing.

"Don't you?" cried Tom; "it's a fact notwithstandin', for the captain himself said so, and that's how I came to know it."

Just as Tom finished speaking, the man in the crow's-nest roared at the top of his voice, "There she blows!"

That was the signal that a whale was in sight, and as it was the first time we had heard it that season, every man in the ship was thrown into a state of tremendous excitement.

"There she blows!" roared the man again.

"Where away?" shouted the captain.

"About two miles right ahead."

In another moment the utmost excitement prevailed on board. Suddenly, while I was looking over the side, straining my eyes to catch a sight of the whale, which could not yet be seen by the men on deck, I saw a brown object appear in the sea, not twenty yards from the side of the ship; before I had time to ask what it was, a whale's head rose to the surface, and shot up out of the water. The part of the fish that was visible above water could not have been less than thirty feet in length. It just looked as if our longboat had jumped out of the sea, and he was so near that I could see his great mouth quite plainly. I could have tossed a biscuit on his back easily. Sending two thick spouts of frothy water out of his blow-holes forty feet into the air with tremendous noise, he fell flat upon the sea with a clap like thunder, tossed his flukes or tail high into the air, and disappeared.

I was so amazed at this sight that I could not speak. I could only stare at the place where the huge monster had gone down.

"Stand by to lower," shouted the captain.

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the men, leaping to their appointed stations; for every man in a whale-ship has his post of duty appointed to him, and knows what to do when an order is given.

"Lower away," cried the captain, whose face was now blazing with excitement.

In a moment more three boats were in the water; the tubs, harpoons, &c., were thrown in, the men seized the oars, and away they went with a cheer. I was in such a state of flutter that I scarce knew what I did; but I managed somehow or other to get into a boat, and as I was a strong fellow, and a good rower, I was allowed to pull.

"There she blows!" cried the man in the crow's-nest, just as we shot from the side of the ship. There was no need to ask, "where away" this time. Another whale rose and spouted not more than three hundred yards off, and before we could speak a third fish rose in another direction, and we found ourselves in the middle of what is called a "school of whales".

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