

THE FALL OF A SEA-MONARCH.

BY FRANK T. BULLEN.

Glorious in all his splendid majesty, the great sun issued forth of his chamber, and all the wild sea basked in his beams with a million, million smiles. Save the sea and the sun and the sky, there was naught apparently existing—it might well have been the birthday of Light. The one prevailing characteristic of the scene to a human eye, had one been there to see, was peace—perfect, stainless peace. Yet beneath that sea of smiling, placid beauty a war of unending ferocity was being waged, truceless, merciless; for into the victors belonged the spoils, and without them they must perish—there was none other food to be gotten.

But besides all this ruthless warfare, carried on inevitably, because without it all must die of hunger, there were other causes of conflict, matters of high policy and more intricate motive than just the blind, all-compelling pressure of hunger. The glowing surface of that morning sea was suddenly disturbed simultaneously at many points, and like ascending incense the bushy breathings of some scores of whales became visible. Perfectly at their ease, since their instincts assured them that from this silent sea their only enemy was absent, they lay in unstudied grace about the sparkling waters, the cows and youngsters frolicking happily together in perfect freedom from care. Hither they had come from one of their richest feeding grounds, where all had laid in a stock of energy sufficient to carry them half around the globe without weariness. So they were fat with a great richness, strong with incalculable strength, and because of these things they were now about to settle a most momentous question.

Apart from the main gathering of females and calves by the space of about a mile lay five individuals, who from their enormous superiority in size, no less than the staid gravity of their demeanor, were evidently the adult males of the school. They lay almost motionless in the figure of a baseless triangle, whereof the apex was a magnificent bull over 70 feet in length, with a back like some keel-less ship, bottom up, and a head huge and square as a railway car. He it was who first broke the stillness that reigned.

Slowly raising his awful front with its down-hanging 20-foot lower jaw exposing two gleaming rows of curved teeth, he said:

"Children, ye have chosen the time and the place for your impeachment of my over-lordship, and I am ready. Well I wot that ye do but as our changeless laws decree; that the choice of your actions rest not with yourselves; that although ye feel lords of yourselves and anxious of ruling all your fellows, it is but under the compelling pressure of our hereditary instincts. Yet remember, I pray you, before ye combine to drive me from among ye, for how many generations I have led the school, how wisely I have chosen our paths, so that we are still an unbroken family, as we have been for more than a hundred seasons. And if ye must bring your powers to test now, remember, too, that I am no weakling, no dotard weary of rule, but mightiest among all our people, conquerer in more than a thousand battles, wise with the accumulated knowledge of a hundred generations of monarchy. Certainly the day of my displacement must come; who should know that better than I? But methinks it has not yet dawned, and I would not have ye lightly pit your immature strength against mine, courting inevitable destruction. Ponder well my words, for I have spoken."

A solemn hush ensued, just emphasized by the slumberous sound of the sparkling wavelets lapping those mighty forms as they lay all motionless and apparently inert. Yet it had been easy to see that along each bastion-like flank the rolling tendons, each one a cable in itself, were tense and ready for instantaneous action, that the great muscle mounds were hardened around the gigantic masses of bone, and that the flukes, each some hundred feet in area, did not yield to the heaving bosom of the swell, but showed an almost imperceptible vibration as of a fucus frond in a tide rip. After a perfect silence of some 15 minutes an answer came—from the youngest of the group, who lay remote from the chief:

"We have heard, O King, the words of wisdom and our hearts rejoice. Truly we have been of the fortunate in this godly realm, and ingrates indeed should we be had our training under so terrible a champion been wasted upon us. But therefore it is, that we would forestall the shame that should overtake us did we wait until thy force had waned and that all-conquering might had dwindled into dotage ere we essayed to put thy teaching into practice. Since thy des-

position from this proud place must be, to whose forces couldst thou more honorably yield than to ours, the young warriors, who have learned of thee all we know, and who will carry on the magnificent traditions thou hast handed down to us in a manner worthy of our splendid sire. And if we be slain, as well may be, remembering with whom we do battle, the greater our glory, the greater thine also."

A deep murmur like the bursting of a tidal wave against the sea-worn lava rocks of Ascension marked the satisfaction of the group at this exposition of their views, and as if actuated by one set of nerves the colossal four swung round shoulder to shoulder, and faced the ocean monarch. Moving not by a barnacle's breadth, he answered, "It is well spoken, oh, my children; ye are wiser than I. And be the issue what it will, all shall know that the royal race still holds. As in the days when our fathers met and slew the slimy dragons of the pit, and unscarred by fathom-long claws or ten-ply coats of mail dashed them in pieces and chased them from the blue deep they ne-touled, so today when the world has grown old, and our ancient heritage has sorely shrunken, our warfare shall be the mightiest among created things."

Hardly had the leviathan uttered the last word when, with a roar like Niagara bursting its bonds in spring, he hurled his vast bulk headlong upon the close-gathered band of his huge offspring. His body was like a bent bow, and its recoil tore the amazed sea into deep whirls and eddies as if an island had foundered. Full upon the foremost one he fell, and deep answered unto deep with the impact. That awful blow dashed its recipient far into the soundless depths, where the champion sped swiftly forward on his course, unable to turn until his impetus was somewhat spent. Before he could again face his foes, the three were upon him, smiting him with Titanic fluke strokes, circling beneath him with intent to catch the down-hanging shaft of his lower jaw, rising swiftly, end on, beneath the broad spread of his belly, leaping high into the bright air, and falling heavily upon his wide back.

The tormented sea foamed and hissed in angry protest, screaming seabirds circled around the conflict, raving sharks gathered from unknown distances, scenting blood, and all the countless tribes of ocean waited aghast. But after the first red fury had passed came the wariness, came the fruitage of all those years of training, all the accumulated instincts of ages to supplement blind brutal force with deep-laid schemes of attack and defence. As yet the three survivors were but slightly injured, for they had so divided their attack, even in that first great onset, that the old warrior could not safely single out one for destruction. Now the youngest, the spokesman, glided to the front of his brethren and faced his waiting sire:

"What! so soon weary? Thou art older than we thought. Truly, this battle hath been delayed too long. We looked for a fight that should be remembered for many generations, and behold—" Out of the corner of his eye he saw the foam circles rise as the vast tail of the chief curved inward for the spring, and he, the cornerer, launched himself backwards a hundred fathoms at a bound. After him, leaping like any salmon in a spate, came the terrible old warrior, the smitten waves boiling around him as he dashed them aside in his tremendous pursuit. But herein the pursued had the advantage, for it is a peculiarity of the sperm whale that, while he cannot see before him, his best arc of vision is right astern. So that the pursuer must needs be guided by sound and the feel of the water, and the very vigor of his chase was telling far more upon his vast bulk than upon the lithic form of his flying enemy.

In this matter the monarch's wisdom was of no avail, for experience could not tell him how advancing age handicaps the strongest, and he wondered to find a numbness creeping along his spine—to feel that he was growing weary. And suddenly, with an eel-like movement, the pursued one described a circle beneath the water, rising swiftly, as a dolphin springs towards his pursuer, and dashing at the dangling, gleaming jaw. These two great jaws met in clashing contest, breaking off a dozen or so of the huge teeth and ripping eight or ten feet of the gristly muscle from the throat of the aggressor. But hardly had they swung clear of each other than the other two were fresh upon the scene, and while the youngest one rested, they effectually combined to prevent their fast-weakening foe from rising to breathe. No need now for them to do more, for the late enormous expenditure of force had so

drained his vast body of its prime necessity that the issue of the fight was but a question of minutes.

Yet he still fought gallantly, though with lungs utterly empty—all the rushing torrent of his blood growing fetid for lack of vitalizing air. At last, with a roar as of a cyclone through his head, he turned on his side and yielded to his triumphant conquerors, who drew off and allowed him to rise limply to the now quiet sea surface. For more than an hour he lay there prone, enduring all the agony of his overthrow, and seeing for before him the long, lonely vista of his solitary wanderings, a lone whale driven from his own, and nevermore to rule again.

Meanwhile, the three had departed in search of their brother, smitten so sorely early in the fight that he had not since joined them. When they found that which had been he, it was the centre of an innumerable host of hungry things that fled to air or sea depths at their approach. A glance revealed the manner of his end—a broken back—while already, such had been the energy of the sea people, the great framework of his ribs was partly laid bare. They made no regrets for the doing of useless things finds no place in their scheme of things. Then the younger said: "So the question of overlordship lies between us three, and I am unwilling that it should await settlement. I claim the leadership and am prepared here and now to maintain my right." This bold assertion had its effect upon the two hearers, who, after a long pause, replied: "We accept, O King, fully and freely, until the next battle day arrives, when the succession must be maintained by thee in ancient form."

So the matter was settled and proudly, the young monarch set off to re-join the waiting school. Into their midst he glided with an air of conscious majesty, pausing in the centre to receive the homage and affectionate caresses of the harem. No questions were asked as to the whereabouts of the deposed sovereign, nor as to what had become of the missing member of the brotherhood. These are things that do not disturb the whale-people, who in truth have a sufficiency of other matters to occupy their thoughts besides those inevitable changes that belong to the settled order of things. The recognition complete, the new leader glided out from the midst of his people, and pointing his massive front to the westward moved off at a stately pace, on a straight course for the coast of Japan.

Long, long lay the defeated one, motionless and alone. His exertions had been so tremendous that every vast muscle band seemed strained beyond recovery, while the torrent of his blood, befouled by his long enforced stay beneath the sea, did not readily regain its normally healthful flow. But on the second day he roused himself, and his mighty head swept the unbroken circle of the horizon to satisfy himself that he was indeed at last a lone whale. Ending his earnest scrutiny, he milled round to the southward, and with set purpose and steady fluke beat started for the Auckland. On his journey he passed many a school or smaller "pod" of his kind, but in some mysterious manner the seal of his loneliness was set upon him, so that he was shunned by all. In 10 days he reached his objective, 10 days of fasting, and impelled by fierce hunger he ventured in closely to the cliffs, where great shoals of fish, many seals, with an occasional porpoise, came gaily careering down the wide gaping tunnel of his throat into the inner darkness of dissolution. It was good to be here, pleasant to feel once more that unquestioned superiority over all things, and swiftly the remembrance of his fall faded from the monster's mind. By day he wandered lazily, enjoying the constant easy procession of living food down his ever-opened gullet; by night he wallowed sleepily in the surf-torn margin of those jagged reefs.

And thus he came to enjoy the new phase of existence, until one day he rose slowly from a favorite reef patch to feel a sharp pang shoot through his wide flank. Startled into sudden, violent activity, he plunged madly around in the confined area of the cove wherein he lay, in the vain endeavor to rid himself of the smart. But he had been taken at a disadvantage, for in such shallow waters there was no room to manoeuvre his vast bulk, and his wary assailants felt that in spite of his undoubted vigor and ferocity he would be an easy prey. But suddenly he headed instinctively for the open sea at such tremendous speed that the two boats attached to him were but as chips behind. He reached the harbor's mouth, and bending swiftly sought the depths. Unfortunately for him a large pinnacle of rock rose sheer from the sea bed some hundred fathoms below, and from this he hurled himself headlong with such fearful force that his massive neck was broken. And next day a weary company of men were toiling painfully to strip from his body its great accumulation of valuable oil, and his long career was ended.—New York Evening Post

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