

CAP'N HAWKINS AND THE WHALE

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The pleasantly drowsy drumming of the rain on the fish shack roof made us all sink back more comfortably. Old Emu noisily lit his scarred pipe and then, after flipping the extinguished match carelessly in an old coffee can, he once again picked up one end of the seine net and began mending.

The sweetish smell of Emu's pipe blended in with the tarry and fish smell of the shack and filled the three of us with a strange feeling of anticipation. As the rain beat a little harder on the roof and slid glistening and noiseless down the single window pane, Emu shifted his pipe a trifle and looked at us.

"You know, boys," he said, "when I was your age, on days like this, I used to sit around the fishshacks back in the old country and listen to the tales the fishermen told. Some of them were hard for me to believe, mostly because I was young then, and hadn't seen all the things that I have today."

Herb and Sock and I wiggled down flatter on our backs on the musty pile of old nets and waited.

"And you know," he continued, "at first, I thought they were fooling me, and I would scoff to myself, but believe me boys, now I think most of those stories were true. A lot of things happen on the ocean that a land-lubber can't understand.

"Just to show you what I mean, I'll tell you a story about something unbelievable that I saw with my own eyes. Do you remember that old schooner called the "Sparhawk" that used to fish out of Gloucester in the old days? Ah, she was a great vessel in her day. Could point up higher'n any other schooner there. Why, when we were reaching along before a good sou'west breeze, we had to put all hands aft so that the bow wouldn't be pushed under water from our speed. She could have taken the "Bluenose" any day. Course, we never did race them, you understand, but the "Sparkaw" was sure a sweet sailor.

"Well, I fished off her for almost ten years, boys, and all the time under old Cap'n Hawkins. He was a little before your time, but I'm telling you, boys, a better skipper never trod the deck of a Gloucester fisherman than old Cap'n Hawkins. When he left the vessel, I just had to leave too, cause the "Sparhawk" just wouldn't have been the same without him.

"The last trip we made is the one I want to tell you about, boys. What a trip that was! At first, boys, it started off just like any other voyage. The night before we sailed for the "Banks," all hands went to church at "Good Voyage." Then, some of the hands went home to their wives and family, but most of us went down to "Xavier and Silva's" to have a farewell drink with the boys. You know, the fisherman never knows when he leaves port whether this trip will be the last, so he always has his farewell drinks.

"The next morning at sun-up, we sailed out of the harbor with the tide, and once clearing Eastern Point Light without port rail keeling over, we set our course No'th-east. The "Sparhawk" reached right along just as pretty a picture as you'd ever want to see. She was a beautiful sight with all sail set, boys.

"Well, we hadn't got any more'n fifty miles off Cape Anne when one of the top-mast boys hollars down something about seeing a huge snake in the water. We all looked to where he pointed, and sure enough, there it was, or what looked lie a snake anyhow. But, it wasn't. It was an arm off a squid just floating there as though it didn't have anything else to do. What a squid that must have been to own an arm like that! Boys, if that arm wasn't over a hundred feet long and as big around as a hogshead, then I won't live to be a hundred.

"Old Cap'n Hawkins knew how much better squid is on a trip than any other bait, so he ordered the arm to be hauled on deck with the winches and to be cut up for trawl bait. And we worked it this way, boys. We'd take and empty one barrel of the bait we'd taken aboard at Gloucester, and we'd fill it with squid. Damned if we didn't fill all our bait barrels with the squid, and it still didn't look as though we had even touched that arm. There wasn't much we could do but heave the rest over the side, but we hated to do it.

"Of course, boys, all this dumping of bait had attracted considerable live fish around us, and they all followed us right along. There were sharks, mostley, but a few tunas, and one whale. We were all kind of surprised to have a whale following us, and I'll be damned if he didn't seem to take a shine to us right away. Long after all the other fish had been left behind, he followed right along just like a little puppy. He

wasn't any more'n average size for a whale, about fifteen tons, I guess, and no more'n a hundred feet long. Just a half-growed whale, I'd say.

"Well, old Cap'n Hawkins was pleased to see the whale following us. Good luck to have it, he said, so we kept heaving hunks of fish to it. After a couple of days, he'd become right playful, and he'd swim up alongside the vessel and kind of rub himself against the side. Most affectionate whale I ever did see. Course, sometimes he'd rub too hard, and the vessel would rock a little and almost jibe on us, but if that happened, "Oscar," which is what we called the whale, would kind'a smile apologetically and swim off a little distance.

"It wasn't too long before he got to know his name, and when one of the crew had a bite to eat for him, why all the man had to do was to shout out "Oscar," and he'd swim right up. And that ain't all, boys. For that one trip, all hands were able to take showers every day if they wanted to. Yes, sir, "Oscar" would come alongside, pick up any of the off-duty men who wanted to shower, and off he'd go, spouting as he went, and every spout was as good a shower as you'd ever want to see. It was some sight, boys, to see a bunck of men all shower'n and cavort'n around on "Oscar's" back, with him just a 'spouting and a 'gurgling along.

"We finally reached the "Banks." The first day we were out, our trawl came up practically bare except for a few dogfish. "Oscar" saw how disappointed we were, so he flapped his tail a couple of times, and then down he went. About a half an hour later, we saw him come up about a mile away, and he's a'spouting and a'jumping all around trying to get our attention. Yes, sir, boys, "Oscar" had located fish for us, and when all the dories had rowed over and our trawls set, when we hauled them up, every hook had a nice fat cod or haddock.

"In three days, boys, three days, mind you, every hold was filled and iced down. We have even built fish pens on deck, and filled every space we could with fish. The crew volunteered to sleep on deck the rest of the trip, and the crew's quarters had been filled solid with fish. Boys, if we had one pound of fish aboard, we had three hundred thousand.

"And all the time, "Oscar" is having the time of his life, locating fish, shower'n down the men, towing the heavy dories back to the schooner. The day we started back to Gloucester finally came, and we were all feeling mighty spry calculating to ourselves how much our share of the catch was going to be, and what we were going to spend it on, and all that. We were crazy with fish, I guess, and "Oscar" probably got more pats and petting that day than he ever had before.

"Well, all sail was hoisted, and off we goes. Old Cap'n Hawkins was pacing up and down the deck looking at the sails, the sky, and every now and then, heaving an affectionate glance at "Oscar." It was the kind'a look a husband casts at his mate, you know, and when I first sees Cap'n Hawkins doing this, I wonder if maybe we didn't name 'Oscar' wrong, and maybe we should'a called her "Mabel," or something. When I first noticed this, boys, I looked quick like at "Oscar," and damned if she hadn't just winked at Cap'n Hawkins. So help me, boys, the wind was taken right out of my sail on that one. Here was Cap'n Hawkins, a staid old bachelor, a'casting loving glances with a female whale.

"Course now, boys, I'll have to admit that "Oscar," or "Mable," was a pretty smooth whale, and she was well put together, but still, that didn't seem like too much of an excuse for Cap'n Hawkins to be acting like that. And as days passed, things got worse. We couldn't make much speed, you understand, with all that weight aboard. And "Oscar" 'd come up and take Cap'n Hawkins way off for a shower, and alone, mind you, alone. They'd go

off into some fog bank and stay there for hours, and what I couldn't figure out was why the rest of the crew didn't notice anything.

"About a week after we left the "Banks," the trouble started. We were still four days out of Gloucester, when we noticed that the "Sparhawk" seemed to be getting lower and lower in the water. There was only one explanation. The weight of the fish must have opened some seams in the bottom. And, what was worse, filled up as the holds were with fish, there was no way to get a pump down there.

"It looked pretty bad, and the crew stopped counting up how much they had earned, and started figuring how much they were going to lose. For, they either had to heave the fish over the side, or the ship, and themselves, would be lost. Cap'n Hawkins walked around trying to figure out what to do when he suddenly noticed that "Oscar" had been trying to get his attention. So, he tells the men not to do anything for a little bit, and off he and "Oscar" goes.

"Well, in about fifteen minutes, back they came, but Cap'n Hawkins looks pretty grim and haggard. As soon as he got on deck, without a word to anyone, he went to the quarter-deck and stared out a'stern. Then, we all felt a slight bumping and a scraping on the bottom of the deck, and all of a sudden, the old "Sparhawk" lifts back out of the water to her old water-mark line, and off we go again toward Gloucester. Once again, "Oscar" had saved the day by carrying us on her back.

"The next day, Cap'n Hawkins looked a little more paler and haggarder, and all the crew thought he was just sick, but I knew what the real reason was. It was impossible for "Oscar" to carry us on her back all the way to Gloucester without killing herself. And Cap'n Hawkins knew this, but he also knew that some of the men had families to support, so what could he do?

"The morning of the fourth day, we sighted land, and all the men were

cheering and yelling and a'carrying on, but Cap'n Hawkins looked like the wrath of God with his eyes all sunk in and his skin commencing to hang off his face like seaweed off a rock. "Oscar" 'd slowed down considerable too, and I had a feeling that she couldn't last much longer.

"Finally, we passed Ten Pound Island and were just about to heave our lines to the wharf when, with one loud, bubbly wheese, "Oscar" dropped away from the vessel, squirmed around for a few minutes, and then turned belly-up and floated out on the tide. The crew were all so happy over getting to port that none of them noticed "Oscar," but Cap'n Hawkins went to his cabin.

"Well, boys, that was some trip. Each man in the crew got two thousand dollars, but Cap'n Hawkins wouldn't take any share at all. He went ashore carrying his gear and, so far as I know, never went to sea again. It was too much for me, so I left the "Sparhawk" and came over here to the Cove.

"By God, boys, damned if it hasn't stopped raining!"

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