



GREENWICH.

CHELSEA

"I WILL not pretend to say," commenced Cuttlefish, "that the story I am about to relate is one of my own experience, for, as you all know, I am not fond of telling marvellous stories; but the observation of our friend Bottlenose, respecting Arctic Joe's mermaid wife, brought all at once into my mind a yarn that I have heard told at least a dozen times while I was on board the 'Endymion' frigate, by a messmate, of the name of Washington Brown, who was the great yarn-spinner of the ship.

"If he had told it only once, I should have put the story down as I have done some of our mates' here, as a lively bit of romance; or, if in the many times he has told it he had varied it in any of the incidents, I should have thought of the saying, that 'liars ought to have good memories,' but, as it was always given in nearly the same words, I believe that, although he must have dreamt some of it, yet the story in the main is true. Still I confess, some parts of it are hard to believe; but as I have never been in such a place as Brown describes myself, it is no more fair for me to say that there is no such place in existence than it would be to doubt the stories of Livingstone and Stanley's explorations in Africa.

"I must say, however, that the story is a long one, and if the company will consent I will divide it into two parts, the first of which I will relate to-night, and the second next week."

The required permission having been granted, Cuttlefish commenced as follows—

WASHINGTON BROWN called his story—

AN ADVENTURE UNDER THE SEA,

And always began it in this fashion—

Before I had the honour of serving in Her Majesty's navy I was employed in assisting my father, who was a fisherman at Polparrow, on the coast of Cornwall.

I was still a lad at the time I speak of, but having been at the business almost from my infancy I knew how to manage a boat as well as many an old stager.

Father and myself generally went out together, but on this memorable occasion the old man was laid up with rheumatics and could not accompany me.

"Never mind," said I, "of course I can take care of the boat, and myself too, and I warrant I'll bring home such a haul as will make you open your eyes!"

Youth is apt to be very confident, as you know, and I quite pooh-poohed all my parents' fears about my setting forth alone on the expedition.

Fortunately it was very fine weather when I started. For the first two or three hours all continued serene. I was getting a good haul, and there seemed every prospect of my carrying out my boast; but suddenly the wind arose in enormous gusts, the moon was darkened, and heavy mountains of cloud were banking up in the skies.

I saw that the weather was going to change for the worse, and began to feel a little uneasy at my position—many miles out and alone in the boat.

"It would be wise," thought I, "to be contented with what I've got, and make for shore before it bursts overhead."

But this was easier said than done.

I put the boat about and began tacking, but the wind was so dead against me that I could make very little headway.

It was soon blowing very stiff indeed, and the waves, surging and frothing up like yeast, tossed my little craft about like a walnut-shell.

I saw that I should have more than all my work to keep her afloat; and would have given everything I ever had or was likely to have to have seen a comrade at my side to assist me.

I at last found it necessary to throw overboard a

good fourth of the fish I had been at such trouble to catch, for the vessel wanted lightening, and lightning she got with a vengeance—for it flashed across the seas in streaks of fire, while the thunder boomed and rolled like a sixty-thousand pounder.

Once or twice, taking advantage of the wind chopping about, I managed to get a little nearer shore; near enough to distinguish the outline of the headland, and to see plainly the light burning in our cottage window; but it was too dark to see anything more, and far too wild a night for any of my friends to get a chance of putting out a boat for my rescue. I must say my little craft battled bravely with the billows, but she gave in at last—sprang a leak—and then I knew that all was up with me.

Still I clung desperately to the broken mast, and then an immense wave, the biggest of its kind I had ever seen, rose up over me, descended with an enormous weight, swamped the vessel, turned her over, and down I went like lead.

From that moment I became insensible.

"Holloa! where am I now?" I cried to myself, in great confusion and wonder. "When I lost my senses I was drowning as fast as I could drown, without any chance of rescue, but now—good gracious me! what place is this?"

It was a curious spot, truly; an immense cavern of hard rock, arched and hollowed out in all manner of fantastic forms, and with all kinds of curious plants and trees growing in it.

A kind of twilight came in through a hole in the roof. The cave smelt strongly of sea-weed, which made me think I had been cast ashore on some wild part of the coast. I little thought that instead of being beside the sea I was under it.

"I must find out where I am, I murmured, struggling to my feet. "I can't have been drowned, or else I could not be alive now. Why, how's this? bless me, I can't walk!"

For I found myself utterly unable to keep my footing over the slippery, sea-weed-covered rocks, and, what was still stranger, the air seemed to press against me so heavily—not that it was the least windy—that I couldn't make my way through it. Added to this, something seemed all filmy, as if seen through a thick mist.

What did it all mean? At length the conviction flashed upon me. I was under the water!

Yes, I was actually right down beneath the sea, perhaps hundreds of fathoms, walking along with difficulty, but breathing as easy as possible. It was wonderful, and I thought I must be dreaming; but I was soon to be bewildered with things that were far more astonishing.

I struggled along to the entrance of the cave, and came in view of a scene that still further increased my amazement.

As far as I could see stretched immense masses of broken rocks, covered with all sorts of marine plants and shells of every possible size and form.

Perched upon an immense shell, which evidently served as a throne, was an enormous cod-fish, as large as a porpoise at least, round him swam about a dozen attendant dolphins, while fish of every species, from sharks to shrimps and sprats, were gathered round their monarch in thousands. Then there were sea-snakes and other monsters, so extraordinary in aspect that you would turn giddy if I were to attempt describing them to you.

Among the fishes I recognised every species that we fishermen were in the habit of catching, either with rods or nets, and while the eyes of the innumerable creatures were turned full upon me, those of these fish in particular seemed gleaming with fearful rage.

Every one of the fish seemed at least twenty times as large as any I had ever seen—the very shrimps being nearly as big as herrings, and the herrings themselves big in proportion (or rather out of proportion).

The whole population at once swarmed round me, glaring angrily, and debating among themselves what they should do with their prisoner—for a prisoner I found I was. Two large lobsters took me in custody, and bore me in triumph to the great cod, the king of the fish, as he reclined majestically upon his shell throne.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, his goggle-eyes glaring at me in a most ferocious and threatening manner, "this mortal is, to judge from his dress, one of those wholesale murderers and kidnappers called fishermen."

I was surprised to hear a fish talk (although I had heard of the "Talking Fish" before), and rather taken aback at the words he said.

All the others joined in assent, accusing me, with one voice, of being a fisherman—the sworn enemy of their race.

"Now then," said King Cod, sternly, "do you plead guilty to the charge of invading my dominions, seizing my subjects, and committing wholesale slaughter among the harmless populace of the ocean?"

"Please, your majesty," said I, "if you mean to ask me whether I catch and eat fish, or sell them to others, I must own I do, like all other fishermen; but I assure you we only do it from necessity, and without it we could not live at all."

"And what would it matter if you didn't live at all?" retorted the king; "a fish has as much right to live as a man, anyhow. Do we come on shore and seize your people to eat or sell?"

"No, certainly not," said I; "but sharks and some other fishes are in the habit of watching for any unfortunate men that may come within their reach, and then snap them up without mercy."

Two tremendous sharks close to me confirmed this assertion by snapping their jaws together in a horribly suggestive manner.

"And if they do eat them," said the royal cod,

"they only avenge the wrongs of fishes in general; for one comrade you lose, we lose thousands. It is not often we catch a man alive, and when we do we make an example of him."

I felt I was in for it; there was no gleam of mercy in the staring and fishy eyes of the great cod, as he gazed at me, and then turned to his equally merciless companions.

"Now we must have a trial," said his majesty. "My friends and advisers, form yourselves into a council. Lobsters, secure the prisoner once more; this is an important case. Is the prisoner here, who confesses he is a fisherman, guilty or not guilty of fish-slaughter, and, if so, is he, or is he not, worthy of death, according to the law made and provided?"

Here I implored his majesty first to hear the story of my life, and, when he agreed, I told him what I always tell to everybody—the simple truth. How I had been brought up to fishing, and taught to regard it as harmless, even creditable; how my father and grandfather before me had been fishermen, and were very good, kind folks, nevertheless.

I then dwelt upon my recent adventure; how I put out, caught a number of fish, but threw them overboard again, when I found myself caught in the storm. I drew a pathetic picture of the perils and terrors I suffered, and the fearful state of grief and anxiety my parents would be in if I were not sent back to them.

At times I fancied that the royal fish was somewhat touched by my solicitations, and thought I saw his hard eyes softening a little, so I resolved to try a little flattery.

"Your majesty, I'm sure, will spare me when you consider my weakness and insignificance," I said. "I am perfectly overwhelmed with the splendour of your majesty's court and commoners; I never expected to see fish of such enormous size, and such glittering caverns, nor could I have believed the ocean contained mountains like that yonder."

All the fishes went into shouts of laughter as I pointed to the object last mentioned.

"Mountain, indeed!" exclaimed the king; "why, that is my friend the Prince of Whales; he's keeping very quiet, for he's not very well, poor fellow, having had a fight lately with a boat's crew of your villainous race, who pierced him with harpoons. The fact is, thou ignorant and finless mortal, that water is a magnifier to human eyes, and therefore, though none of us are larger than life, we appear so to you."

"And would your majesty please to inform me," I asked, wishing to keep him in a good humour, "how it is that I, being merely a land animal, find myself thus able to live and breathe beneath the water?"

"For a great depth below the surface," returned his scaly majesty, with an air of great wisdom, "the sea is so dense that human beings cannot breathe it; but, sinking down here, you have reached the purer elements, where no winds or storms can come, and where the water is so light that any kind of creature can live in it."

"Aud how far may I be from the surface, great king?" I said.

"Seven miles and a half," said he.

"Amazing!" I cried.

"But we are wasting time," said the king, resuming his stern demeanour; "I have to put the question of your guilt to a jury, and abide by their decision."

A regular legal court was now assembled; a grand jury of four-and-twenty fish of different species was formed.

A shark prosecuted and a John Dory undertook my defence. The king assumed the office of judge, and the trial began.

It was worse than being at the bar of the Old Bailey, for there I might have had some chance of escaping torture at least, but here, who could tell what sufferings my fishy enemies might not inflict upon me?

There were, of course, no witnesses to call as to character; I was to be judged only upon my own confessions as to my past life.

The shark made an eloquent speech, painting the deeds of fishermen in the darkest colours, declaring that they were nothing but bands of wholesale murderers, and especially quoting the fate of one of his relations, who was recently taken by them.

"In this case," said the shark, "my unfortunate relative fell a victim to malice only, since, as men do not eat or sell sharks, there can be no reason for catching and killing them. The very fact of being a fisherman is a crime deserving of death, by the laws of the sea; the prisoner himself confesses that he has for years been a fisher man—or rather boy—and therefore must, in his time, have destroyed thousands of your majesty's loving subjects. An example is required to put a stop to these outrages; justice demands that the culprit should be immediately consigned to condign punishment."

The John Dory defended me against this attack with great ability, dwelling upon the fact of my youth as a reason for mitigating the sentence; saying that I had been taught fishing by others, and did not take to it from enmity towards the fishes themselves, but in order to live.

"It would have been very different," pursued the Dory, "had the prisoner been one of those cruel anglers who catch fish for mere sport, and do not care what suffering they inflict—such culprits as those deserve no mercy, and I would show them none; but with this lad, so far from being a wilful murderer of fish, it has been simply a matter of business; therefore I hold him not guilty of the capital offence, and only guilty, if at all, of the far more excusable crime of unintentional piscicide, or fish slaughter."

The jury, having heard both sides, retired into an inner cave, while I was left a prey to the most harrowing anxiety.

(To be continued.)