



A whale-chaser.

Since whales are mammals they must come to the surface to breathe. They do this regularly every ten or fifteen minutes, and their exhaled breath ("blow") rises as a condensed vapour to a height of about 10 ft. While on the surface they usually "blow" three times before diving. It is these miniature geysers that reveal the whale's location, and from their look-out 300 ft. above the Strait the whalers can, with powerful glasses, pick up the whales many miles away.

The modern whale-chaser is a speed-boat with a crew of two, one man at the helm and another manning the harpoon gun on the bow. Each boat (there are four in the fleet) is 34 ft. long with a 7 ft. 6 in. beam. Built on long slim lines and driven by engines generating an average of 280 horsepower, the fastest of the chasers travels at 35 m.p.h. and the slowest at 22 m.p.h. Handling them at speed in a heavy sea and manœuvring them when harpooning or playing a stricken whale is work for highly trained men with strength, steady nerves, keen eyes, and almost perfect judgment.

Nor is the work of harpoon gunner a sinecure. Crouching on the narrow prow while the boat bounds and slews through rough seas with no foothold except a strip of wet coconut matting and no support except his gun, drenched with blinding spray as the waves sweep over the bow, with only a few seconds to sight his prey and fire his harpoon, this is work with thrills and danger enough for the most adventurous.

The gun (40 mm. calibre) is mounted on a standard on the bow. Its loading action is not unlike that of an oversize shot-gun. The harpoon is 4 ft. long and is loaded into the muzzle of the gun. It is propelled by an explosive cartridge. To the shaft of the harpoon is fitted a sharp triangular head filled with explosive and fired by a seven-second time-fuse which bursts to shrapnel inside the whale. Just below this head are three 6 in. barbs which lie back along the shaft while the harpoon is in flight, but which open out when the head enters the whale, fixing the harpoon firmly in the flesh. A 200 fathom line is attached to the end of the harpoon and runs back into a forward hatch. This line is used to play the whale.

In an open look-out high above the Strait wait the crews of the chasers scanning the sea with eager eyes. Suddenly a whale spouts far away to the south. Down the cliff path the crews race, row out to their waiting chasers and roar out from the Channel into the winter sea. From the look-out directions are given to the chasers by radio-telephone, and soon they approach the whales. Yes, there are two of them, a bull whale and a cow. This is luck. Mating whales cruise close together, and if the cow whale is harpooned first her mate will stay close beside her until she is killed, thus becoming an easy mark for the hunters. But if the bull is hit first the cow will desert him immediately. It will be a matter of chance, though, which whale is attacked first. In heavy weather and with only a second or two to sight the whales, differences in sex are not easily discernible.

"There she blows!" but the chasers, too, have been spotted. Taking fright, the whales dive rapidly. A flip of the huge tails and they are gone. Over roar two of the chasers and spread out on the course they think the whales will follow. There goes the tell-tale spout again, and over speed the hunters waiting for the second "blow." Up one goes beside them, and round slew gunner and gun. With a crash the harpoon flashes towards the whale. The coils of