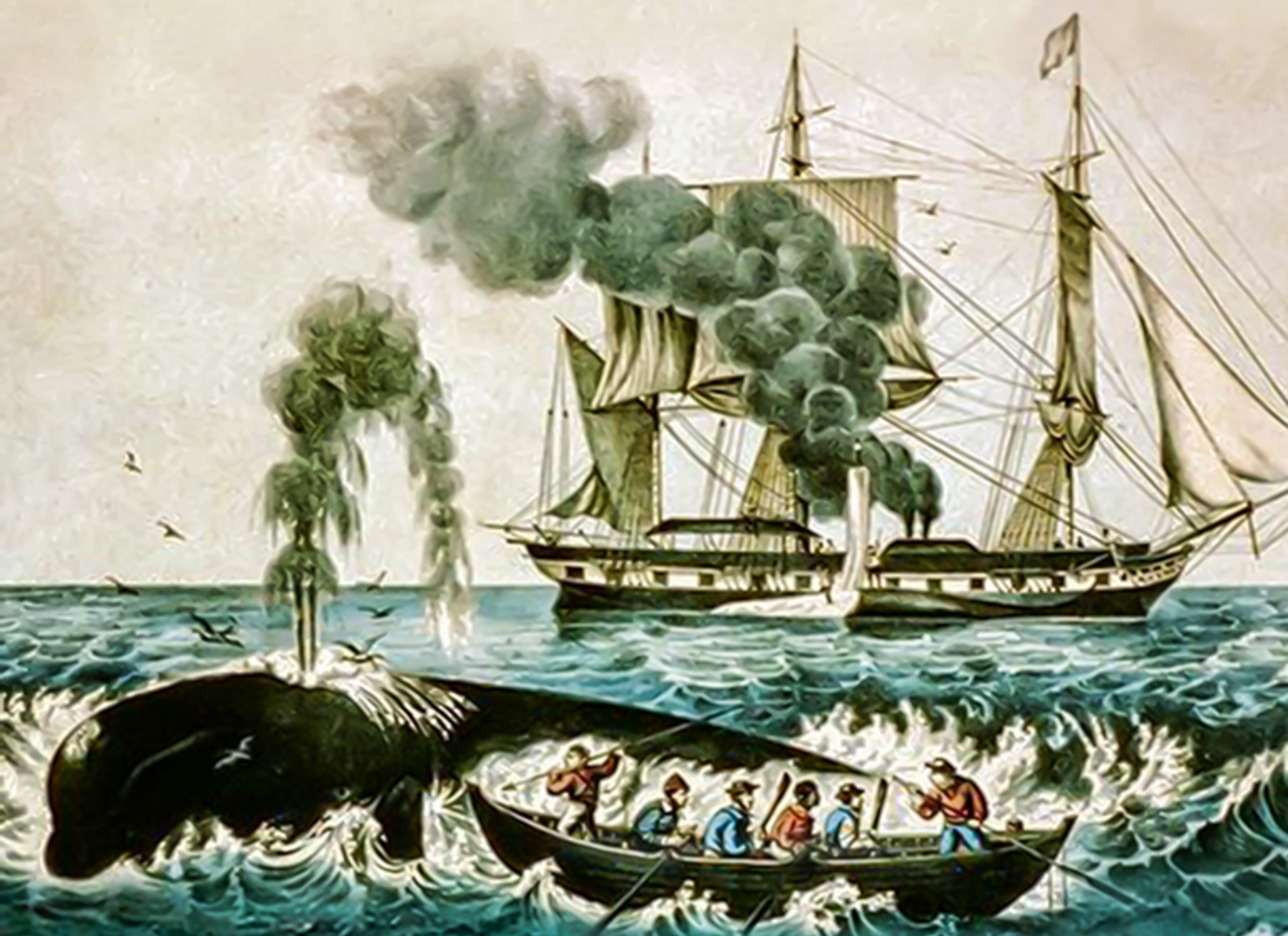


CLASSICS TO GO
A YEAR
WITH A WHALER



WALTER NOBLE BURNS

A Year with a Whaler

Walter Noble Burns



"Cutting Out" A Whale

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CHAPTER I

THE LURE OF THE OUTFITTER

When the brig *Alexander* sailed out of San Francisco on a whaling voyage a few years ago, I was a member of her forecastle crew. Once outside the Golden Gate, I felt the swing of blue water under me for the first time in my life. I was not shanghaied. Let's have that settled at the start. I had shipped as a green hand before the mast for the adventure of the thing, because I wanted to go, for the glamor of the sea was upon me.

I was taking breakfast in a San Francisco restaurant when, in glancing over the morning paper, I chanced across this advertisement:

WANTED—Men for a whaling voyage; able seamen, ordinary seamen, and green hands. No experience necessary. Big money for a lucky voyage. Apply at Levy's, No. 12 Washington Street.

Until that moment I had never dreamed of going to sea, but that small "ad." laid its spell upon my imagination. It was big with the lure of strange lands and climes, romance and fresh experiences. What did it matter that I had passed all my humdrum days on dry land? "No experience necessary!" There were the magic words staring me in the face. I gulped down my eggs and coffee and was off for the street called Washington.

Levy's was a ship's outfitting store. A "runner" for the house—a hulking man with crafty eyes and a face almost as red

as his hair and mustache—met me as I stepped in the door. He looked me over critically. His visual inventory must have been satisfactory. I was young.

"Ever been a sailor?" he asked.

"No."

"Makes no difference. Can you pull an oar?"

"Yes."

"You'll do. Hang around the store to-day and I'll see what vessels are shipping crews."

That was all. I was a potential whaler from that minute.

A young working man in overalls and flannel shirt came in later in the day and applied to go on the voyage. He qualified as a green hand. But no spirit of adventure had brought him to Levy's. A whaling voyage appealed to his canny mind as a business proposition.

"What can we make?" he asked the runner.

"If your ship is lucky," replied the runner, "you ought to clean up a pile of money. You'll ship on the 190th lay. Know what a lay is? It's your per cent. of the profits of the voyage. Say your ship catches four whales. She ought to catch a dozen if she has good luck. But say she catches four. Her cargo in oil and bone will be worth about \$50,000. Your share will amount to something like \$200, and you'll get it in a lump sum when you get back."

This was "bunk talk"—a "springe to catch woodcock"—but we did not know it. That fluent and plausible man took pencil and paper and showed us just how it would all work

out. It was reserved for us poor greenhorns to learn later on that sailors of whaling ships usually are paid off at the end of a voyage with "one big iron dollar." This fact being discreetly withheld from us, our illusions were not disturbed.

The fact is the "lay" means nothing to sailors on a whaler. It is merely a lure for the unsophisticated. It might as well be the 1000th lay as the 190th, for all the poor devil of a sailor gets. The explanation is simple. The men start the voyage with an insufficient supply of clothing. By the time the vessel strikes cold weather their clothes are worn out and it is a case of buy clothes from the ship's slop-chest at the captain's own prices or freeze. As a consequence, the men come back to port with expense accounts standing against them which wipe out all possible profits. This has become so definitely a part of whaling custom that no sailor ever thinks of fighting against it, and it probably would do him no good if he did. As a fore-castle hand's pay the "big iron dollar" is a whaling tradition and as fixed and inevitable as fate.

The outfitter who owned the store did not conduct a sailor's boarding house, so we were put up at a cheap hotel on Pacific street. After supper, my new friend took me for a visit to the home of his uncle in the Tar Flats region. A rough, kindly old laboring man was this uncle who sat in his snug parlor in his shirt sleeves during our stay, sent one of the children to the corner for a growler of beer, and told us bluntly we were idiots to think of shipping on a whaling voyage. We laughed at his warning—we were going and that's all there was to it. The old fellow's pretty daughters played the piano and sang for us, and my last evening on shore passed pleasantly enough. When it came time to say good-bye, the uncle prevailed on my friend to stay all night on the plea that he had some urgent matters to talk over, and I went back alone to my dingy hotel on the Barbary Coast.

I was awakened suddenly out of a sound sleep in the middle of the night. My friend stood beside my bed with a lighted candle in his hand.

"Get up and come with me," he said. "Don't go whaling. My uncle has told me all about it. He knows. You'll be treated like a dog aboard, fed on rotten grub, and if you don't die under the hard knocks or freeze to death in the Arctic Ocean, you won't get a penny when you get back. Don't be a fool. Take my advice and give that runner the slip. If you go, you'll regret it to the last day of your life."

In the yellow glare of the candle, the young man seemed not unlike an apparition and he delivered his message of warning with prophetic solemnity and impressiveness. But my mind was made up.

"I guess I'll go," I said.

He argued and pleaded with me, all to no purpose. He set the candle on the table and blew it out.

"You won't come?" he said out of the darkness.

"No."

"You're a fool."

He slammed the door. I never saw him again. But many a time on the long voyage I recalled his wise counsel, prompted as it was by pure friendliness, and wished from my heart I had taken his advice.



In Bowhead Waters

Next day the runner for Levy's tried to ship me aboard the steam whaler *William Lewis*. When we arrived at the shipping office on the water front, it was crowded with sailors and rough fellows, many of them half drunk, and all eager for a chance to land a berth. A bronzed and bearded man stood beside a desk and surveyed them. He was the skipper of the steamer. The men were pushing and elbowing in an effort to get to the front and catch his eye.

"I've been north before, captain," "I'm an able seaman, sir," "I know the ropes," "Give me a chance, captain," "Take me, sir; I'll make a good hand,"—so they clamored their virtues noisily. The captain chose this man and that. In twenty minutes his crew was signed. It was not a question of getting enough men; it was a mere matter of selection. In such a crowd of sailormen, I stood no show. In looking back on it all, I wonder how such shipping office scenes are possible, how men of ordinary intelligence are herded

aboard whale ships like sheep, how they even fight for a chance to go.

It was just as well I failed to ship aboard the *William Lewis*. The vessel went to pieces in the ice on the north Alaskan coast the following spring. Four men lost their lives and only after a bitter experience as castaways on the floes were the others rescued.

That afternoon Captain Shorey of the brig *Alexander* visited Levy's. I was called to his attention as a likely young hand and he shipped me as a member of his crew. I signed articles for a year's voyage. It was provided that I was to receive a \$50 advance with which to outfit myself for the voyage; of course, any money left over after all necessary articles had been purchased was to be mine—at least, in my innocence, I imagined it was.

The brig was lying in the stream off Goat Island and the runner set about the work of outfitting me at once. He and I and a clerk went about the store from shelf to shelf, selecting articles. The runner carried a pad of paper on which he marked down the cost. I was given a sailor's canvas bag, a mattress, a pair of blankets, woolen trousers, dungaree trousers, a coat, a pair of brogans, a pair of rubber sea boots, underwear, socks, two flannel shirts, a cap, a belt and sheath knife, a suit of oil-skins and sou'wester, a tin cup, tin pan, knife, fork and spoon. That was all. It struck me as a rather slender equipment for a year's voyage. The runner footed up the cost.

"Why," he said with an air of great surprise, "this foots up to \$53 and your advance is only \$50."

He added up the column of figures again. But he had made no mistake. He seemed perplexed.

"I don't see how it is possible to scratch off anything," he said. "You'll need every one of these articles."

He puckered his brow, bit the end of his pencil, and studied the figures. It was evidently a puzzling problem.

"Well," he said at last, "I'll tell you what I'll do. Bring me down a few curios from the Arctic and I'll call it square."

I suppose my outfit was really worth about \$6—not over \$10. As soon as my bag had been packed, I was escorted to the wharf by the runner and rowed out to the brig. As I prepared to climb over the ship's rail, the runner shook me by the hand and clapped me on the back with a great show of cordial goodfellowship.

"Don't forget my curios," he said.

CHAPTER II

THE MEN OF THE "ALEXANDER"

The brig *Alexander* was a staunch, sea-worthy little vessel. She had no fine lines; there was nothing about her to please a yachtsman's eye; but she was far from being a tub as whaling ships are often pictured. She was built at New Bedford especially for Arctic whaling. Her hull was of sturdy oak, reinforced at the bows to enable her to buck her way through ice.

Though she was called a brig, she was really a brigantine, rigged with square sails on her fore-mast and with fore-and-aft sails on her main. She was of only 128 tons but quite lofty, her royal yard being eighty feet above the deck. On her fore-mast she carried a fore-sail, a single topsail, a fore-top-gallant sail, and a royal; on her main-mast, a big mainsail with a gaff-topsail above it. Three whale boats—starboard, larboard, and waist boats—hung at her davits. Amidships stood the brick try-works equipped with furnaces and cauldrons for rendering blubber into oil.

As soon as I arrived on board I was taken in charge by the ship keeper and conducted to the fore-castle. It was a dark, malodorous, triangular hole below the deck in the bows. At the foot of the ladder-like stairs, leading down through the scuttle, I stepped on something soft and yielding. Was it possible, I wondered in an instant's flash of surprise, that the fore-castle was laid with a velvet carpet? No, it was not. It was only a Kanaka sailor lying on the floor dead drunk. The bunks were ranged round the walls in a double tier. I selected one for myself, arranged my mattress and

blankets, and threw my bag inside. I was glad to get back to fresh air on deck as quickly as possible.

Members of the crew kept coming aboard in charge of runners and boarding bosses. They were a hard looking lot; several were staggering drunk, and most of them were tipsy. All had bottles and demijohns of whiskey. Everybody was full of bad liquor and high spirits that first night on the brig. A company of jolly sea rovers were we, and we joked and laughed and roared out songs like so many pirates about to cruise for treasure galleons on the Spanish Main. Somehow next morning the rose color had faded out of the prospect and there were many aching heads aboard.

On the morning of the second day, the officers came out to the vessel. A tug puffed alongside and made fast to us with a cable. The anchor was heaved up and, with the tug towing us, we headed for the Golden Gate. Outside the harbor heads, the tug cast loose and put back into the bay in a cloud of smoke. The brig was left swinging on the long swells of the Pacific.

The captain stopped pacing up and down the quarter-deck and said something to the mate. His words seemed like a match to powder. Immediately the mate began roaring out orders. Boat-steerers bounded forward, shouting out the orders in turn. The old sailors sang them out in repetition. Men sprang aloft. Loosened sails were soon rolling down and fluttering from every spar. The sailors began pulling on halyards and yo-hoing on sheets. Throughout the work of setting sail, the green hands were "at sea" in a double sense. The bustle and apparent confusion of the scene seemed to savor of bedlam broke loose. The orders were Greek to them. They stood about, bewildered and helpless. Whenever they tried to help the sailors they invariably snarled things up and were roundly abused for their pains.

One might fancy they could at least have helped pull on a rope. They couldn't even do that. Pulling on a rope, sailor-fashion, is in itself an art.

Finally all the sails were sheeted home. Ropes were coiled up and hung neatly on belaying pins. A fresh breeze set all the snowy canvas drawing and the brig, all snug and shipshape, went careering southward.

At the outset of the voyage, the crew consisted of twenty-four men. Fourteen men were in the fore-castle. The after-crew comprised the captain, mate, second mate, third mate, two boat-steerers, steward, cooper, cook, and cabin boy. Captain Shorey was not aboard. He was to join the vessel at Honolulu. Mr. Winchester, the mate, took the brig to the Hawaiian Islands as captain. This necessitated a graduated rise in authority all along the line. Mr. Landers, who had shipped as second mate, became mate; Gabriel, the regular third mate, became second mate; and Mendez, a boatsteerer, was advanced to the position of third mate.

Captain Winchester was a tall, spare, vigorous man with a nose like Julius Caesar's and a cavernous bass voice that boomed like a sunset gun. He was a man of some education, which is a rarity among officers of whale ships, and was a typical New England Yankee. He had run away to sea as a boy and had been engaged in the whaling trade for twenty years. For thirteen years, he had been sailing to the Arctic Ocean as master and mate of vessels, and was ingrained with the autocratic traditions of the quarter-deck. Though every inch a sea dog of the hard, old-fashioned school, he had his kindly human side, as I learned later. He was by far the best whaleman aboard the brig; as skillful and daring as any that ever laid a boat on a whale's back; a fine, bold, hardy type of seaman and an honor to the best

traditions of the sea. He lost his life—poor fellow—in a whaling adventure in the Arctic Ocean on his next voyage.

Mr. Landers, the mate, was verging on sixty; his beard was grizzled, but there wasn't a streak of gray in his coal-black hair. He was stout and heavy-limbed and must have been remarkably strong in his youth. He was a Cape Codder and talked with a quaint, nasal, Yankee drawl. He had been to sea all his life and was a whaleman of thirty years' experience. In all these years, he had been ashore very little—only a few weeks between his year-long voyages, during which time, it was said, he kept up his preference for liquids, exchanging blue water for red liquor. He was a picturesque old fellow, and was so accustomed to the swinging deck of a ship under him that standing or sitting, in perfectly still weather or with the vessel lying motionless at anchor, he swayed his body from side to side heavily as if in answer to the rise and fall of waves. He was a silent, easy-going man, with a fund of dry humor and hard common sense. He never did any more work than he had to, and before the voyage ended, he was suspected by the officers of being a malingerer. All the sailors liked him.

Gabriel, the second mate, was a negro from the Cape Verde islands. His native language was Portuguese and he talked funny, broken English. He was about forty-five years old, and though he was almost as dark-skinned as any Ethiopian, he had hair and a full beard as finely spun and free from kinkiness as a Caucasian's. The sailors used to say that Gabriel was a white man born black by accident. He was a kindly, cheerful soul with shrewd native wit. He was a whaleman of life-long experience.

Mendez, the third mate, and Long John, one of the boatsteerers, were also Cape Verde islanders. Long John was a giant, standing six feet, four inches; an ungainly, powerful