



Whaling with Captain Penniman

*Log of Thomas Knowles*



Edited by Donald S. Heines

ORLEANS, MASSACHUSETTS

*Wednesday 20th*

Very pleasant; very clear though but little wind. A whaleship in sight some 8 miles off our lee beam, with her boats down, evidently getting ready to chase whales though keeping on her course probably so as not to attract our attention. About 9 1/2 raised a sperm whale coming nearly to windward so as to pass between the two ships. After getting as near to him as we could with the ship, at 12 1/2 lowered the boats and chased him with paddles and sails, he at the same time milling off to leeward. Chased him several hours, he continually eluding us by changing his course under water, and keeping us about so far off. After about 3 hours the wind freshened and we came up with him. He rose about a ship's length ahead of us, and we thought we were sure of him. We were sailing and paddling with all our might right after him and got abreast of his flukes. One more spout of the whale, one more boat's length ahead and the boatsturner, Mr. Bowman, would have planted his iron in his back. At that instant the whale caught sight of us and sank like a stone, leaving a boiling wake where one were. The boatsturner saw him going and threw his iron though he knew it was useless. If he had had a right-handed instead of a left-handed dart he would have reached him. We then kept straight on and when the whale kept up again he was a long distance to windward of us, coming down toward us. Thinking we could not take him head and head as we should be obliged to use our oars which would frighten him, we hauled aft our sheets, (we carried a large sail and a stridding sail) stood off to our right and then stood back again behind the whale and were again stealing on him with sails and paddles the captain having decided to steer right over his flukes. We got within a boat's length of him and down he went without seeing the boat having had his spoutings out. By this time the other two boats had overtaken us and we started to come to the ship which was nearly out of sight (10 miles off). We rowed to windward an hour and half before meeting the ship. We then made an hour and 20 minutes at rate of 5 miles and luffed to wind and made a large bright fire in an iron pot and hoisted it up for a signal to the two boats whose horns we soon heard. It was then getting rough, thick and rainy, and we were glad to get them aboard. The mate had been within two boats' length of the whale after we left. We got on board at 7 h[ours], the others 10. The other ship appeared to have got a whale, and this whale knew it and was shy.

*Thursday June 21*

Rugged, thick rainy and unpleasant. Close hauled on the wind, Standing S. W. The mate caught two porpoises this forenoon. Nothing important. The longest day-15 h 37 m.

*Friday 22*

Quite pleasant and quite clear. Cruising for whales. Captain caught a porpoise this afternoon. Nothing of importance.

*Saturday 23*

Strong breeze, rugged and thick part of the day. Cruising; wind from W. Caught a porpoise. A ship, with the Howe's Rig, passed near us this afternoon, on the other tack, working W. Probably an American, and about 1200 tons, deeply laden. She showed her latitude, chalked on a blackboard, 24 degrees 00 minutes, differing from ours 40', the Captain fears his chronometer may have been injured by the jarring of the gimbals by the working of the rudder and now keeps it in his chest.

*Sunday 24*

Strong breeze. Working S. E. A very heavy rain last night. A brig passed near us to windward this afternoon, but did not run down to us although we hauled our head yards aback.

*Monday June 25, 1860*

Very pleasant. Lively breeze from N. E., working to windward. At six o'clock raised a school of sperm whales about 2 miles to windward, a merchant ship having gone through them before us and stirred them up. Worked to windward about an hour and hove to when a couple of whales came up half a mile to leeward. First and second mate lowered. The mates sailed down alongside of the larger of the two, an 80bbbl. whale. The boatsteerer struck, the iron drew, the whale threw up his flukes filled the boat's sail with water and rolled her over. Second mate took off 3 men, the others sat in the bottom of the boat. Third mate then went down took off the rest got a line to the ship and attempted to work the boat to the ship, but had to cut and beat up to the boat, which set a light (it now being dark), hauled her alongside and hoisted her in on deck. Saved the line, but lost both line tubs, paddles, two oars, the sail, and other small things; the gun was lashed to the thwart. Examination of the iron showed by the way in which it was bent that it had not been put in more than 5 or 6 inches. The boatsteerer's fault. He will be "broke."

*Thursday 26*

Blowing a half a gale of wind from the N. W. and increasing through the day. Very rough and unpleasant tonight. Ship rolling and pitching badly. The iron hoops and crockery "fetching away" and making a great racket. The only refuge is the "bunk." Lying to head to S. S. W. Have seen no sail or whale. Men engaged in repairing the damaged boat. Lying to under close reefed main topsail and spencer and fore topmosttop sail. Ship rolling infernally. "So ends."

*And so begins Wednesday 27th*

More moderate this morning and moderating through the day. Rather thick. Caught two porpoises this afternoon. The cook looks "blacker than thunder" whenever we catch a porpoise, it gives him so much trouble to cook them. Captain is a "dead shot"

at a porpoise. This afternoon wind close to one of Mr. Swift's line tubs, lost day before yesterday, lowered boat and picked it up. There was general overturning in the pantry about 12 o'clock last night.

*Thursday 28*

Foggy and damp all day long. Light wind from W. Standing N. on one tack, S. on the other. This forenoon picked up Mr. Swift's boat keg of water. Mate shot lance from whaling-gun.

*Friday June 29 1860*

Light wind from S. E. and very pleasant and smooth. Standing N. N. W. A ship under full sail shedding sail on both sides has been following us all day long and is 8 or 9 miles astern tonight. Lowered this morning immediately after breakfast for blackfish. Captain's and 3rd mate's boats got two apiece and the other boats one each. Captain's boat got the largest one. One of ours was a "cow" and carried her calf on her right fin after we had fastened to her. We have to be careful to keep clear of them when they go into their "flurry" and are dying. Our first one, the large one, gave a tremendous jump out of the water when we struck him. Stripped the blubber off the fish cleaned it and partly minced it. I tried the mincing knife and could use it very well. A black fish is a more dangerous fish to handle than a sperm whale, he can turn about so much quicker. The school is feeding and were quite tame and we were among them two or three hours. We moored four to a "hoke" [?] and could take no more fish having used up all our irons.

*Saturday 30*

Very pleasant. Light wind from E. Standing W. Have been boiling out our blackfish. The vessel bark astern of us yesterday has been near us all day having caught up with us during the night as we were lying to. We have been standing on one tack and the other to allow the smoke to drift away, while she has been steering with the wind. Heads aft and stridding-sails out. She carries no royals. She has not sailed two-thirds the distance we have, but to-night we move several miles ahead of her. Lay to after supper and waited for her to come up with us. The mate took the Captain's boat and lowered her with letters. I went with him. She proved to be the S. D. Ryerson of Yarmouth N. S. more than a month from Shields, Eng. bound to Boston, loaded with coal and minerals. She was a dirty craft and the crew a stupid set of fellows. Their latest paper was Lloyd's London Weekly Newspaper of Apr. 8. They merely hauled up the clew of the main sail to allow us to board, and we had hard work to keep the boat clear of her sides as she was going through the water quite fast. She is the only vessel the Minerva has been able to beat. Sent a letter by her to my Father. They thought us a fast sailer and about 700 tons. She was 500 tons Eng. measurement.

*Sunday July 1, 1860*

Very pleasant indeed. Numerous fish in sight going to windward, viz. "Finbacks," Grampuses, Killers, Jumpers, Blackfish, Cowfish, Porpoises and Sunfish, but not a sperm whale. Wind from E. Steering N. W. & S. W.

*Monday 2*

Very pleasant indeed. Moderate breeze from S. E. About 12 o'clock raised a large (110 bbl.) sperm whale coming to leeward. At one, lowered three boats and sailed out ahead of the ship for time. At his second rising we got within a ship's length of him and he went down. When he came up again, the mate was in the best position, sailed on and Mr. Bowman struck him, driving the iron (a one-flue) in to the socket. The other two boats ran down to him but before either of us could fasten, the line parted by the whale's sounding and he went off to windward and across the bow of our boat, we pressing on the oars and sails, and escaped with our iron in him. He went near the ship going to windward in a hurry and rolling and flashing his flukes. After supper a vessel chased us setting main royal and showing her signal. We thinking she was in want of something, tacked ship she ran down to us and proved to be the Atlantic of New Bedford, Captain Wm B Sherman. The Captain came on board and staid two or three hours leaving at 11 o'clock. Rather a bore after a hard day's work and when we want to be digging to windward to find the whale who must be sore and lame. He was an "old sag," gray with age. Capt. S. is a great brag.

*Tuesday 3*

Very pleasant. Moderate breeze from S. E. Working to windward. The Atlantic was in sight this morning, some distance to windward. Today she has been running off and tonight is nearly out of sight to leeward. A whaler has been in sight boiling. The Atlantic sails but little better than we do. The Captain and all hands are very "blue" today, being nearly discouraged by yesterday's failure. The prizes are great in whaling and of course must bear a small proportion in number to the losses, which are not however for that reason any the less hard to bear. Mr. Bowman, 3rd mate, displays the most philosophy; he does his duty like a man, and bears disappointment cheerfully and courageously. Captain caught a sunfish, a flat jellyfish 3 ft. long 2 wide, 2 clumsy fins, large mouth.

*Wednesday 4th July 1860*

Cloudy all day, wind from W. Cruising. The most quiet 4th of July I ever spent. Not a gun fired not a signal hoisted not a ship in sight until towards night and then in the distance. A whaler laying aback and apparently waiting for us to come up. Supposed her the Atlantic. But our Captain does not feel sociable, because he has got no oil and so changed his course so as to not to meet the vessel, which he thinks is the Atlantic and probably wants to put a letter on board for me to take home.