

Martha's Vineyard - Return of Whaling Ships

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The past winter on this island has been unusually severe the number of snow-storms numerous, and the drifts almost blocking up a passage from one part of the island to another. Cases have occurred, where the sheep, which with us are un-housed at all seasons, have been buried in the drifts, and only extricated by the thaws, which have laid bare their prison-houses. The poor creatures, thus liberated, were found to be very meagre in flesh, and to have eaten nearly all the wool from their backs for sustenance. Lone as our winter residence by the waters may appear, we are not without visitors, and the more numerous, as the signs of a storm send the fleets into our safe and capacious harbor, and cause a bristling forest to arise before our doors. As Coleridge said of Mont Blanc -

*And visited all night by troops of stars,
Or when they climb the sky, or when they sink,*

so might it be said of us –

*Who all the winter long behold the sail
Upon our waters, sheltering from the sea.*

Situated midway between Boston and New York, the chief coasting trade of the country passing near us, there are few vessels sailing to and fro from Atlantic ports, that do not occasionally visit us, and the foreign commerce is by no means inconsiderable, that casts anchor in our harbor. The whale-ships of Nantucket, arriving from the cruising grounds in the inclement season of the year, stop at Edgartown to discharge their cargoes into lighters, that they may pass over the bar in safety. It is interesting to go down to the wharves on their arrival, and take a look at the crew and the vessel. A ship was towed in by our steamer through the ice, and made fast to the wharf during our late cold weather. She had been absent four years, and the sailors, having been so long under charge of Old Neptune, had acquired quite a salt-sea air. A black seaman, who, with another tar, was busy in making all things right upon deck, fixed my attention; his head-gear had been so arranged as to cover his ears from the frost, and his pea-jacket bore marks of great industry in the way of patch-work, as well as great variety in the shape and color of the patches. I thought of the history of that jacket, so served up with the tale of the man himself. When it was new, I dare not say, nor how many years ago it began to be antiquated; but a warmer jacket was not on board, nor one entitled to more respect, in consideration of the service it had done, and in view of the mental and physical toil that had been employed upon it. Many a song had been sung while that old jacket was in process of repair many thoughts of loved ones had been incorporated into its texture, if thoughts could slip out of the fingers ends, or if the beating heart could force its music into shreds and patches. The wearer of that coat had a face full of interest. It told of one no longer young, hoping and ambitious; but yet, of one, who could find

content with ordinary scenes of comfort, and who had a heart to rejoice and an eye to weep with his fellow-men. An intelligent young sailor, a native of Nantucket, also one of the crew, was looking over the ships side, and I entered into conversation with him, inquiring if this was his first voyage, and how he liked to be so long absent. His answers were, that he had never been to sea before, and that it was dull work, for the crew soon got tired of one another, and longed for new faces, and new things to talk about. Several sailors, while I was talking, came near to listen, and their eyes, and their ears, and their minds, seemed to be devouring a new face, and voice, and person. I walked away to another part of the wharf, and took an eager look of the ship! her hull, her masts, and rigging, and in fancy I almost invested her with life, while I thought of the seas she had traversed, and the ports she had visited. What strange stars had shined upon her! what strange men had looked out from Pacific isles to see the Yankee ship; through what storms had she passed! what music had the winds made in her rigging! and how, like a faithful mother, had she held in close embrace, the crew, and kept at bay the winds and the waves seeking their destruction ! That old ship, the copper torn off, the seams open, the sails worn, the hull and the rigging, rusty, to my eye, was venerable and dear.