

Whalers and woggin: a new vocabulary for interpreting some early accounts of the great auk and penguins

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ABSTRACT: The overlooked word “woggin”, with many variants, was widely used by Yankee whalers for both the great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) and for penguins (Spheniscidae), as documented in numerous logbooks and journals and at least two published sources. Although in use from at least 1762 until the 1860s, this word appears to be entirely unknown in scholarly literature and merits wider recognition both for understanding early accounts and for its potential for revealing new information about the extinct great auk.

KEY WORDS: etymology – *Pinguinus impennis* – Spheniscidae – whaling.

INTRODUCTION

Aside from the dodo, perhaps no other bird more strongly calls to mind the dismal history of human-caused extinction than the great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*), a flightless denizen of the North Atlantic the last known individuals of which were taken in 1844. The species has achieved an almost mythical aura and since its passing more than a few men have been rapt with an obsession for either its mortal remains or any knowledge that could be discovered concerning the bird, the latest of these, and assiduous chronicler of the others, being Fuller (1999).

One of the subjects to which auk-obsessed authors have devoted much attention is the various names that have been applied to the great auk (for example Grieve, 1885: 121–139; Newton, 1896: 303–304; Blasius, 1903: 169; Fuller, 1999: 394–401). Chief among these is the word “penguin”. Although the derivation of the word itself has seemingly never met with definitive resolution, it is generally agreed that the great auk was the original “penguin”, and that this name was later applied to those birds in the Southern Hemisphere now nearly universally known by that name today. That sailors should conflate these two kinds of birds, deemed so distinct by ornithologists, is natural enough, as both are large, black and white, flightless birds that stand erect and swim with paddle-like flippers.

Here we report another name used for both great auks and penguins by Yankee whalers for over a hundred years in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that seems to have gone entirely unrecorded in any of the ornithological or other scholarly literature. In the writing of the often poorly schooled authors of whaling journals and logbooks this word had many variants: wogæn, waggin, wargan, wargin, waugin, wogen, woggin, woging, woglin, yawgin.

We have settled on “woggin” as the prototype for several reasons – it is the most frequently used spelling; it is the spelling used in one of the more revealing of the few published accounts we have found that uses the word; and it seems the most likely to approach the probable pronunciation. We suspect from the variants that in pronunciation the g was always hard. The o

instead of being short, however, may have been long, which is difficult to render phonetically in English without resorting to some contrivance such as “wohggin” or “woeggin”. On the other hand the o may have been broad so as to sound like “wawggin”.

In the following accounts that were taken from unpublished records of whaling voyages, we have attempted to keep the original spelling and punctuation. In most of these journals something approaching an equal sign (=) was used to indicate degrees of latitude and longitude.

SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE ACCOUNTS OF WOGGINS THAT PERTAIN TO PENGUINS

1. *Asia*, ship of Nantucket, Massachusetts, voyage of 1791–1794. Logbook kept by Silvanus Crosby¹; at Desolation Island (Kerguelen Island, where four species of penguin occur), Southern Indian Ocean.

December the 20 Day 1792 ... at 1 P M Sent our Boat on Shore After Some refreshments She returned with A Plenty of Woggins we Cooked Some for Supper

2. Unidentified vessel, of Sag Harbor, New York, voyage of 1806–1807. Personal journal of Elias Ludlow kept 1804–1809²; in South Atlantic near the latitude of Bahia Blanca, Argentina.

15 November ... fine clear wether but no whales make their apeerences yet cetched plenty of fish ... and kild one woglin at 10 am saw one right whale ... Latt by obs 40=16S

3. *Barclay*, ship of New Bedford, Massachusetts, voyage of 1797–1799. Journal of Christopher Almy³; “Island of St Mary’s” (Isla Santa Maria at the entrance of the Golfo de Arauco, Chile).

The seventeenth of 11th month [November] 1798. There is sea fowl in abundance of all kinds. There is one sort the whalemen call woggins, commonly called Penguins that cannot fly, neither have they any feathers, but have stubs like wings which they have to defend themselves with and when they walk hold them up and for that reason look like small boys a walking. Their nest is in every hole in the side of the hills.

4. *Columbus*, ship of New Bedford, Massachusetts, voyage of 1824–1825. Logbook, keeper Arthur Cox⁴; in South Atlantic near the latitude of Bahia Blanca, Argentina.

November 15 1824 ... saw some finbacks and a number of wargans and some fowl but not plenty. . . Latitude in 40=40 Long 53=12

5. *Condor*, ship of New Bedford, voyage of 1833–1834. Logbook, keeper Edward W. Collins⁵; in South Atlantic, near and to the north of the Falkland Islands (at “Latt 48=42 Feb 4 52=52 59=22W” the preceding day).

Feb 2d [1834] All these 24 hours fresh Galles and cloudy with rain and fog Saw woggins ... [no positions for this day]

6. *Canton*, ship of New Bedford, voyage of 1834–1838. Logbook, keeper Oliver Wilcox⁶; coordinates indicate general latitude of Falkland Islands for January 1825, south and west of Cape Horn for February 1838, and between Cape Horn and the Antarctic Peninsula for March 1838.

Jan. 12. [1835: page entitled “off Patagonia”] ... saw a number of phinbacks & some Wright Whales. Woggins &C &C ... Latt 52=20S

Jan. 13 [1835] ... Saw a great number of Wright and finback whales Woggins or penguins &C ... Latt. By Obs 52=43 [S]

Feb. 21 [1838: page entitled "Off The Horn"] ... Saw a finback whale & other inhabitance of the sea sutch as Wogings, gony, Moukes, Haglets, Bank duck & porposes fastened to 3 of the later But O Shocking, to say, Saved not one Latt 58=19S Long 81=27W

March 1 [1838] ... A finback seen & wogings in vast numbers & noisy with their shril sharp shreaking or howling in the dead hours of the night not unlike the sound of a Codtaker's horn on Bobell &C Also a few gony, moukes, hagletts, Petrel, unusual by numerous, & a single Bluejay, a Sea Hen, A bank Duck, see, together several shoals of porpos came around the bows ... Lt. 57=38S Lg 61=40W

Gony or gooney refers to the larger albatrosses (*Diomedea*), moukes refers to the smaller albatrosses or mollymawks (*Thalassarche*), hagletts are various large petrels. We have no idea what could be meant by a "Bluejay" unless it refers to the Blue Petrel (*Halobaena caerulea*) or one of the prions (*Pachyptila*), which are of a bluish color.

7. *Arab*, ship of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, voyage of 1838–1840. Benjamin Cushman, master; logkeeper unknown⁷; about 100 km west of Kerguelen Island, which was made the following day.

Wednesday the 28th [November 1838] First part of this Day light winds from the NNE ship steering ESE saw one seal yawgins finbacks and humpbacks ... Lat by obs 48.51 [S] Long by Ch 67.18

8. *Clara Bell*, ship of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, voyage of 1855–1858. Journal of Robert Weir⁸; in South Atlantic north of Tristan da Cunha.

2nd [January 1856] Wednesday
 Raised whales this morning—and lowered the quarter boats by 6 oclock—returned with our usual good luck—
 Caught a "Waugin" a species of sea bird that very much resembles the penguin—this was about the size of a drake—We are now bound for a cruise off the Congo River—and St Helena ground for Sperm Whales—

Discussion of Southern Hemisphere woggin

In the preceding passages there is often little or no indication of what a woggin might be or the wording may be ambiguous. The *Barclay* account, however, leaves little room for doubt that woggin and penguin are equivalent. That woggin was an alternative name for penguin is also unequivocally established in two publications. One was an article from an American seamen's magazine⁹ (Anonymous, 1831, 1832) that we have reprinted here (see Appendix, pp 77–78). The other is a book based on a voyage lasting from 1864 to 1869 (Lund, 2001) but not published until 36 years later (Beane, 1905).

J. F. Beane on the whaler *Java* out of New Bedford wrote on approaching Amsterdam Island (Beane, 1905: 88):

on the 15th day of January [1865] we sighted land, three points on the starboard bow, some twenty miles away. While twice that distance from the land we had heard the dismal 'wauk' of the penguin, and now and then had a glimpse of one of these wingless wanderers, that are sometimes seen a hundred miles at sea. Sailors call them 'waugins,' and their discordant cry is usually taken as a warning that land is not very far away.

He illustrated a "waugin" (Beane, 1905: 91; see Figure 1) but all other mention of the birds at Amsterdam, and later at Kerguelen Island, on 10 Feb 186[5?], is as "penguins" (Beane, 1905: 163), which by then was doubtless the name generally in use among landsmen. Nevertheless, Beane's account establishes that the name "woggin" was still in use among whalers as late as the 1860s.



Figure 1. Sketch of a “Waugin” from Beane (1905: 91). In the book, this appeared in his account of Amsterdam Island, where only the rockhopper penguin (*Eudyptes chrysocome*) occurs, which this certainly is not. The neck adornment indicates a king penguin (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*), so the original sketch was probably made at Kerguelen Island, which was also visited by Beane and where king penguins are common.

NORTHERN HEMISPHERE ACCOUNTS OF WOGGINS THAT PERTAIN TO THE GREAT AUK

We have found three references to woggins in the northwestern North Atlantic that can seemingly refer only to the great auk.

1. *Sandwich*, sloop of Nantucket, voyage of 1762–1762. *Journal of Micajah Coffin*.¹⁰

4 mo 19th [19 April 1762] wind Started to Northward got on the Banks On the Latter Part Calm. Caught 10 wogens. Latt. by OB 36=48

5 mo 10th [10 May 1762] the Wind Came Round to the Northward in a Flurry or hard Squall. Spoke with Seth Clark [master of an unidentified whaler.] Saw Wogæns. I Judge we are Nigh the Banks Latt. by Dr 36=30. [N]

Two days previously the position was “36=17 N”. At this latitude “the Banks” would

presumably be the Outer Banks of North Carolina, which is consistent with hunting the so-called “Southern” or “Hatteras Ground,” where sperm whales were abundant between April and September (Townsend, 1935).

2. *Desire*, schooner of Wareham, Massachusetts, voyage of 1775–1775 to Davis Straits.¹¹

3 Sept 1775 [saw] wargins.

3. Abraham Russell navigation exercise book.¹²

The cover of this schoolboy’s manuscript workbook bears the lofty title “Abraham Russell of Dartmouth, his Best Navigation Book Learnt by Ichabod Hatch School Master and also the Surveying Art the 20th of Febu AD 1793.” The back cover is decorated with a circular cartouche enclosing a bird (Figure 2) and the title “A Sea Waggin found on the banks of Newfound Land.” The image of the bird was copied by overlaying an original and pricking with a pin through both copies to transfer the shape, a technique used later by scrimshanders to transfer designs. The bird was then inked in, and in this case, ink flowed through the holes to the page below.

The drawing is highly stylized but shows the short tail, short legs, and large hooked bill concomitant with a great auk. There is an effort to show the pied plumage although the distribution of light and dark is not faithful to nature. An apparent circle around the eye may be an attempt to recall the white spot in front of the eye of a great auk in breeding plumage. The title in the cartouche was evidently written in after both the cartouche and the bird were drawn. The same legend is written twice outside the circle in different scripts in one of which the word for the bird is clearly “Waggin,” but in the other appears to be “Woggin.”

Russell’s sketch bears a little resemblance to the figure of two great auks (“pengwins”) that appeared in the last 32 editions of a navigational guide called *The English pilot: the fourth book* that were published in London between 1716 to 1794 (see Olson *et alii*, 2007: 79–86 this issue). This source would almost certainly have been available to any aspiring American student of navigation, but if it provided a model for Russell he would have to have added the legs and modified the bill considerably, as well as altering the name from “pengwin” to “sea waggin”.

The Grand Banks of Newfoundland was one of the main wintering and feeding areas of the great auk (Fuller, 1999). The diving time and swimming distance of a great auk would have been far less than that of any whale or porpoise and it is likely that an aggregation of these large, flightless birds could have been chased down, exhausted, and captured by strong and hungry handlers of whaleboats. For this reason, the great auk would have been of far more interest and worthy of remark than other seabirds that could simply remove themselves by flying away.

ON WOGGIN

So far as we have been able to ascertain, there is no indication in the ornithological literature of a word such as “woggin” being applied either to the great auk or to penguins. Grieve (1885: 121–139) discussed the names for this bird at considerable length. Newton (1896) in his magisterial *Dictionary of birds* mentioned no such name, either where it would appear alphabetically nor under his discussions of the great auk (his garefowl) or penguins. Nothing similar to “woggin” is listed by Murphy (1936) among numerous vernacular names given

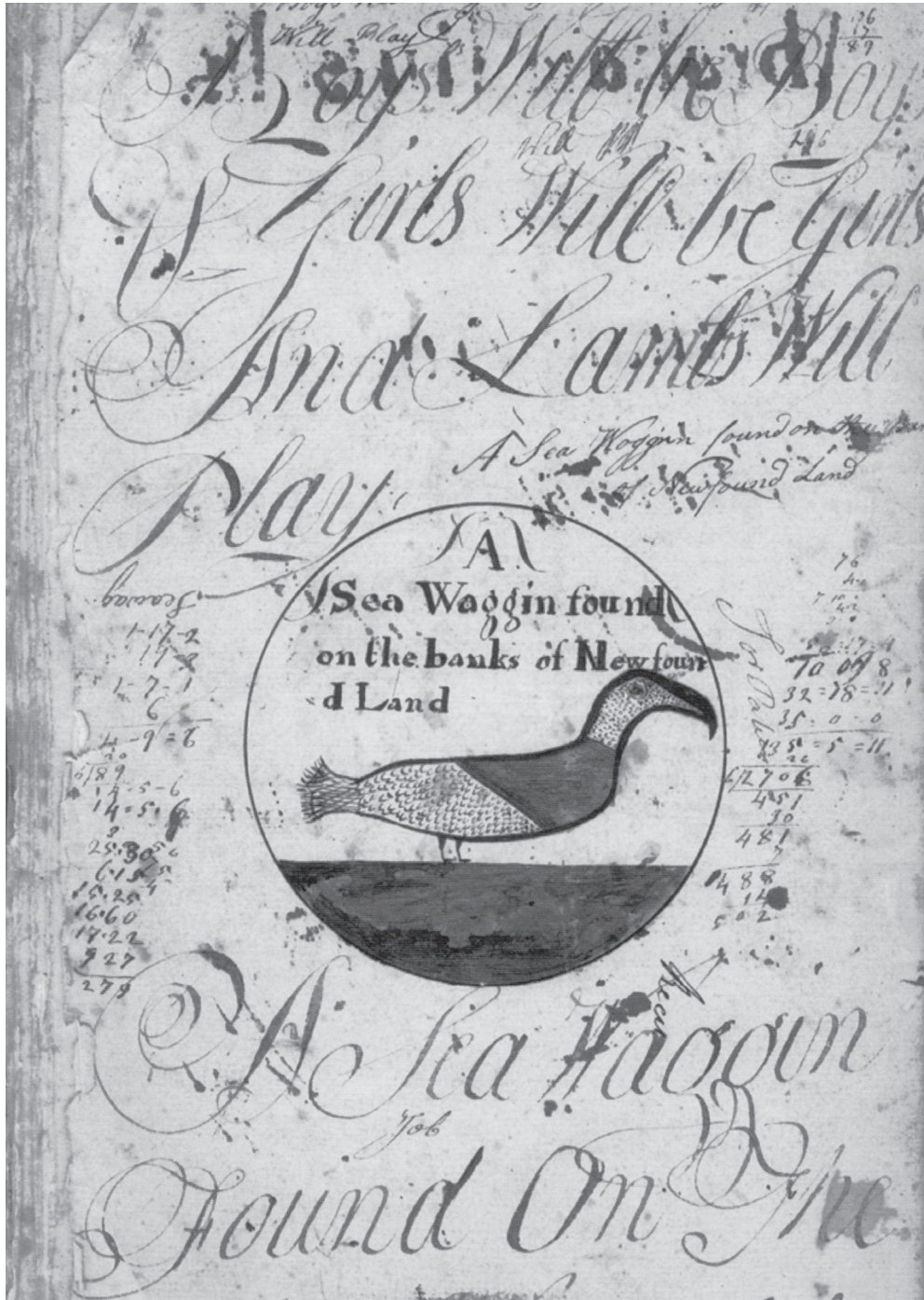


Figure 2. Sketch of a great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) from the back cover of Abraham Russell's schoolboy navigation book dated 1793. It is labelled "A Sea Waggin found on the banks of Newfound Land". Reduced: the circle is exactly 4 ins (101 mm) in diameter. Reproduced by courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

to the various species of penguins found around South America. Murphy, who voyaged in 1912–1913 aboard the *Daisy*, one of the last whalers under sail, encountered three species of penguins at South Georgia but mentions no such term as “woggin” as being current among the whalers of that day (Murphy, 1947). Neither the *Oxford English dictionary* nor any of several unabridged dictionaries we consulted has a word closely similar to “woggin” that is used in connection with any kind of bird.

Yet this term was in use at least from 1762 until the 1860s among American whalers. Perhaps it never came into general usage except among whalers and passed out of fashion with the extinction of the great auk and the general adoption of “penguin” for the southern birds.

One can only guess at the etymological origin of “woggin.” Beane’s (1905: 88) rendering of the cry of a penguin as “wauk” suggests a possible onomatopoeic origin. Any connection with German “Wogen” (waves) would seem rather fanciful. There is a word “woggle”, a variant of the verb “waggle” that could possibly be pertinent. This leads to the word “wobble”, used in connection with the great auk. Newton (1896: 1041) discounted “wobble” as “almost as likely to refer to any other species of *Alcidae* which flutter their wings”, and it does not ever seem to have been used for penguins. Newton’s dismissal is difficult to understand. From Blasius’ (1903) detailed bibliography it appears that “wobble” is attributable solely to John Josselyn (1672: 11), whose description can hardly apply to anything but the great auk.¹³ If that term was indeed used for the great auk in New England in the 1670s, there is apparently no trace of its use subsequently.

And this raises the question of which was the original “woggin”, the great auk or a penguin? If the term was endemic to Yankee whalers, as it may well have been, they would certainly have encountered great auks before penguins and so “woggin” may have followed the same course of transfer as the word “penguin” itself. This is supported by the fact that all of the uses of “woggin” for the great auk that we found antedate all but the earliest use of “woggin” for penguins.

Etymology notwithstanding, it is important to make scholars aware of the bibliocryptic word “woggin” and its variants. It is most curious that it has escaped the attention of scholars for so long. Knowing the meaning of “woggin” will certainly help in interpreting accounts of whaling voyages and may shed some light on the encounters of men and penguins during the early years of whaling. It could be even more important if additional sources should provide new information on the extinct great auk. Practically nothing is known of this bird at sea. If, as the account of the *Sandwich* suggests, great auks were as far south as the latitude of North Carolina as late in the year as May, that is a significant biological fact. There are probably numerous other instances out there of great auks appearing in logbooks and journals under one or another guise of the word “woggin” and it will be of interest to learn what these might reveal.

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to our attention. Ives Goddard, Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, provided useful linguistic commentary. Brian Schmidt, Division of Birds, Smithsonian Institution, assisted with the figures.

NOTES

¹ IMA-244 (microfilm copy of the original), New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library (NBWM), 791 Purchase Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts 02740.

² Unnumbered original, Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, 161 Main Street, Cold Spring Harbor, New York 11724.

³ MMC 1045 (original and edited transcript) Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave. SE, Washington, DC 20540. In the transcription the word for the bird is spelled “moggin”, but the original is smudged and we assume that “woggin” was intended.

⁴ KWM 228, NBWM.

⁵ KWM 54, NBWM.

⁶ KWM 43, NBWM.

⁷ 380a, NBWM.

⁸ Mystic Log 164, G. W. Blunt Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, 75 Greenmanville Avenue, Mystic, Connecticut 06355. Portions of the journal, including the passage reproduced here, were published by Hareven (1977) (see http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1977/5/1977_5_46.shtml accessed 27 October 2006).

⁹ The text in *Sailor's magazine, and naval journal* (Anonymous, 1832) is reprinted absolutely verbatim from *Badger's weekly messenger* (Anonymous, 1831).

¹⁰ S221 1762j typed transcript and original, Nicholson Collection, Providence Public Library, 150 Empire Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903.

¹¹ Jan Parmentier (University of Ghent): from a presentation entitled “From the Davis Straits to the Falklands: Nantucket Whaling during the period 1772–1777”, given at the annual Whaling History Symposium sponsored by the Kendall Institute and New Bedford Whaling Museum, 15–16 October 2005.

¹² MSS 64 Ser R Subser 47, NBWM.

¹³ “The *Wobble*, an ill shaped Fowl, having no long Feathers in their Pinions, which is the reason they cannot fly, not much unlike the *Penguin*; they are in the Spring very fat, or rather oily, but pull'd and garbidg'd, and laid to the Fire to roast, they yield not one drop” (Josselyn, 1672: 11).

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APPENDIX

The following droll account is reproduced from *Sailor's magazine, and naval journal*⁹ (Anonymous, 1832). We have been unable to trace on which of two voyages this incident took place, as the ship *Triton* was on the Brazil Banks early in 1827 near the end of a voyage beginning in 1825 and again later in the year at the beginning of a voyage that ended in 1828 (Lund, 2001). The penguin most likely to have been involved here would be the Magellanic penguin (*Spheniscus magellanicus*) rather than any species of *Aptenodytes*.

Jack Woggin, the domesticated Penguin.

It sometimes happens that an individual from the families of aquatic birds, distinguished for nothing but their open-throated voracity and their fear of the human species, rises above its nature and gives some evidence of civilization and the higher glimmerings of what may be called an intellectual instinct. The following remarkable circumstance, never before published, is in proof of the above remark. It is strictly a fact that can be attested by many living witnesses.

The whale ship *Triton*, of New-Bedford, was cruising on the Brazil Banks in the year 1827. The morning's work had been tediously laborious, but successful—it had brought a whale to his death-flurry. The captured monarch of the deep had struggled bravely, lashed the sea into white foam, and stained that foam with the sanguine stream of his blood ; but it was death with which he grappled, and the monster, like a huge spoil of war, was towed alongside, and secured by the fluke chains to the ship. Grog was served, as customary on these triumphant occasions, and a part of the crew retired below, to partake of the two delicacies of a whaleman's fare—bread and salt junk. A person looking overboard, saw a Penguin, (Genus *aptenodytes*.) commonly called by the sailors a “woggin,” between the body of the whale and the ship. The water was so discolored by the blood of the whale, that nothing could be seen but the head and flippers of this new visitant. He was evidently attempting to get upon the whale's back. One of the crew leaped upon the whale, and the woggin came fearlessly to his hand, and was taken on board. On holding a consultation, it was determine to kill the strange bird and make a purse of his skin ; but one, more humane than the rest, proposed that he should be cast overboard, which was done, and all hands were called to commence cutting in the whale. In a short time, the same penguin made his appearance, and by its actions expressed a desire to be taken on board. It was accordingly done by the command of the captain, when the woggin, in a stately manner walked aft, and showed signs of happiness and contentment. He was perfectly tame, would suffer the approach of any one of the crew, and, in a few days, so far learned his duty as a seaman, that when in calm weather he was put overboard to collect his food, which consisted of small fish, he would, as soon as his meal was ended, returned to the ship to be taken on board.

He became a general favorite with the crew, and received the name of “Jack Woggin,” with which he seemed much pleased, and would come to the call with as much alacrity as a dog. It was singular to observe his exclusive attachment to the crew of the good ship *Triton*. When lying by on the cruising

ground for a “gam,” (the whalemens term for a visiting party) Jack Woggin would sometimes, when in the water, approach the boats of other whale ships, but all the attempts of their crews to get him on board proved ineffectual ; he would dive and avoid them ; but whenever the boats of the Triton came near him, he would hasten to be taken on board.

One day, when a perfect calm pervaded the deep, Jack had been put overboard for food and exercise, and, in company of some of his own species, had proceeded to some distance from the ship, a squall suddenly arose, and the ship was driven three or four miles from its station. All was bustle and confusion, when it was known that Jack Woggin had been left behind. The men aloft were ordered to keep a sharp look-out for this fellow-whaleman. In about two hours, the joyful cry from the mast-head was “Jack Woggin is in sight.” With much difficulty, panting from the severity of his exertions, he approached the ship and was taken on board. He had been swimming for dear life, through the turbulent seas, to regain his post of duty.

For three months Jack Woggin strutted with a kind of official dignity across the after part of the deck, feeling himself much above going before the mast. He had not an enemy on board ; and had he been permitted to have seen the end of the voyage, it is possible that he might have come in for a share of the profits. When he wanted food he usually walked up to the man at the helm, and looked him steadily and wishfully in the face, continuing this until his request was granted. He ate beef cut into small slices and freshened so that it had but little taste of salt, and bread—then would walk to the water cask for his drink.

But we must approach the catastrophe. One day Jack Woggin was asking for his dinner, and the captain, unable to find any freshened meat for him, gave him some slices of salt junk, and in two hours this jewel of a seaman was a dead woggin. It was something amusingly solemn, something like a mock tragedy, to witness the lengthened visages and noiseless step of the crew, as they gathered around the lifeless body of Jack Woggin, laid out in due form, and prepared for his last la[u]nch. They looked upon him as they would have done upon a brother sailor under similar circumstances ; or, as they would have gazed upon a favorite ship stranded upon the rocks—

“Whose prow shall never part the billows more”.

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