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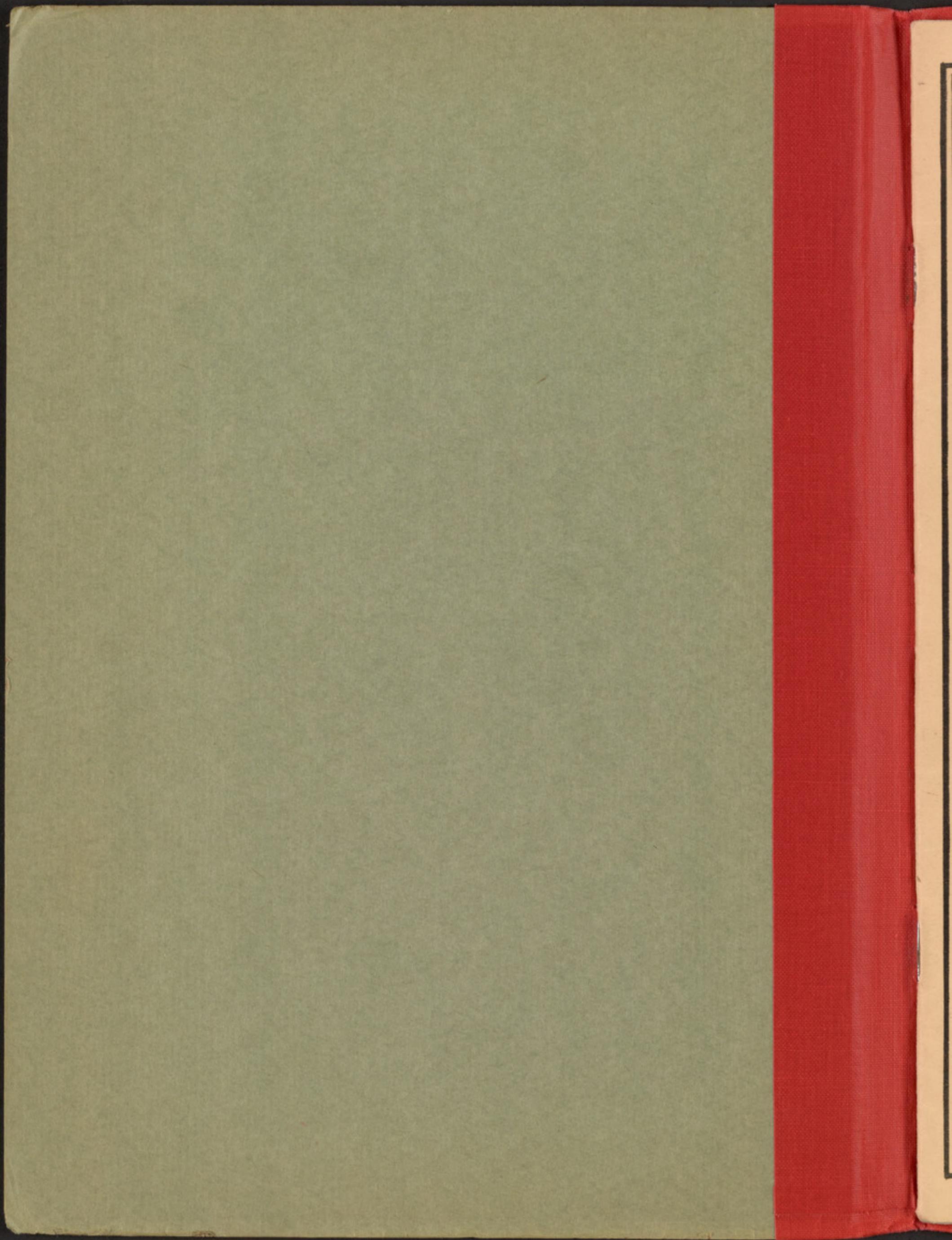
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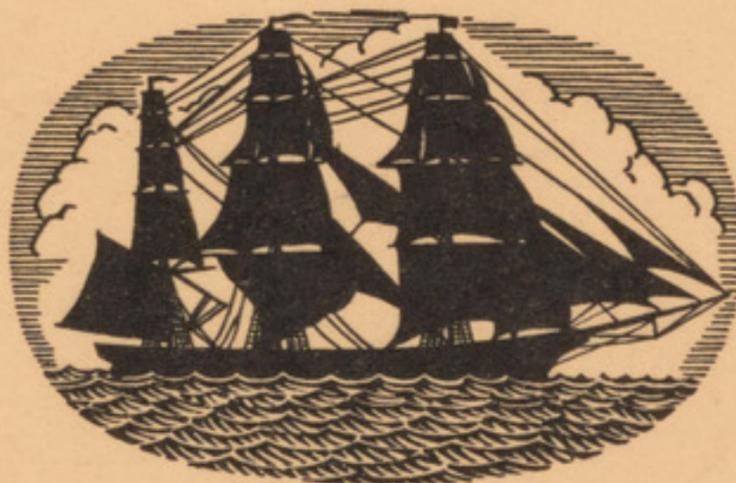
POLAR WHALING

**A SEA-LETTER NARRATIVE OF A CRUISE
IN THE OKHOTSK SEA IN 1849**

by
WILLIAM HENRY HOLMES
First Mate of the Bark SHEPERDESS
of Mystic, Connecticut
1848-1851



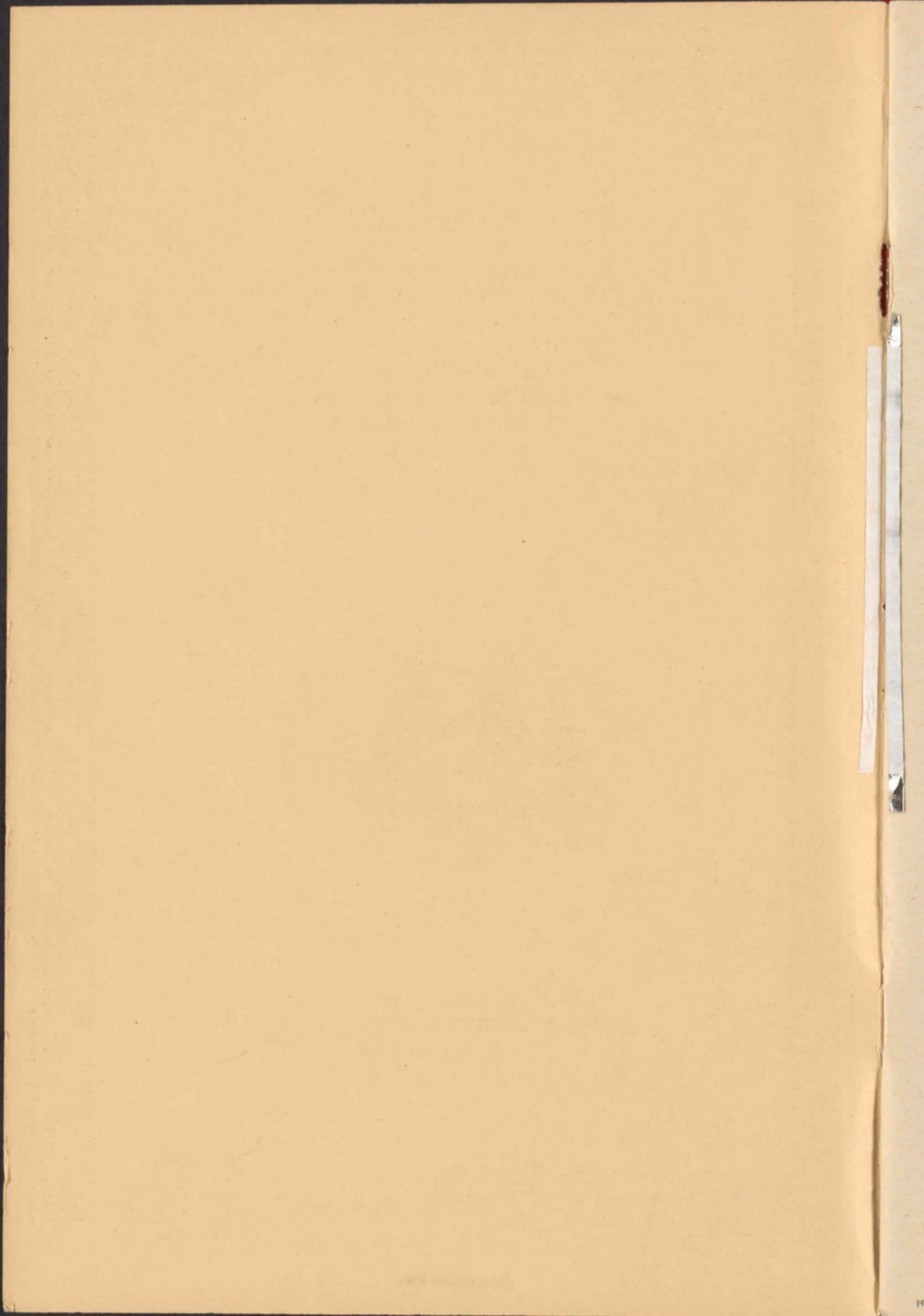
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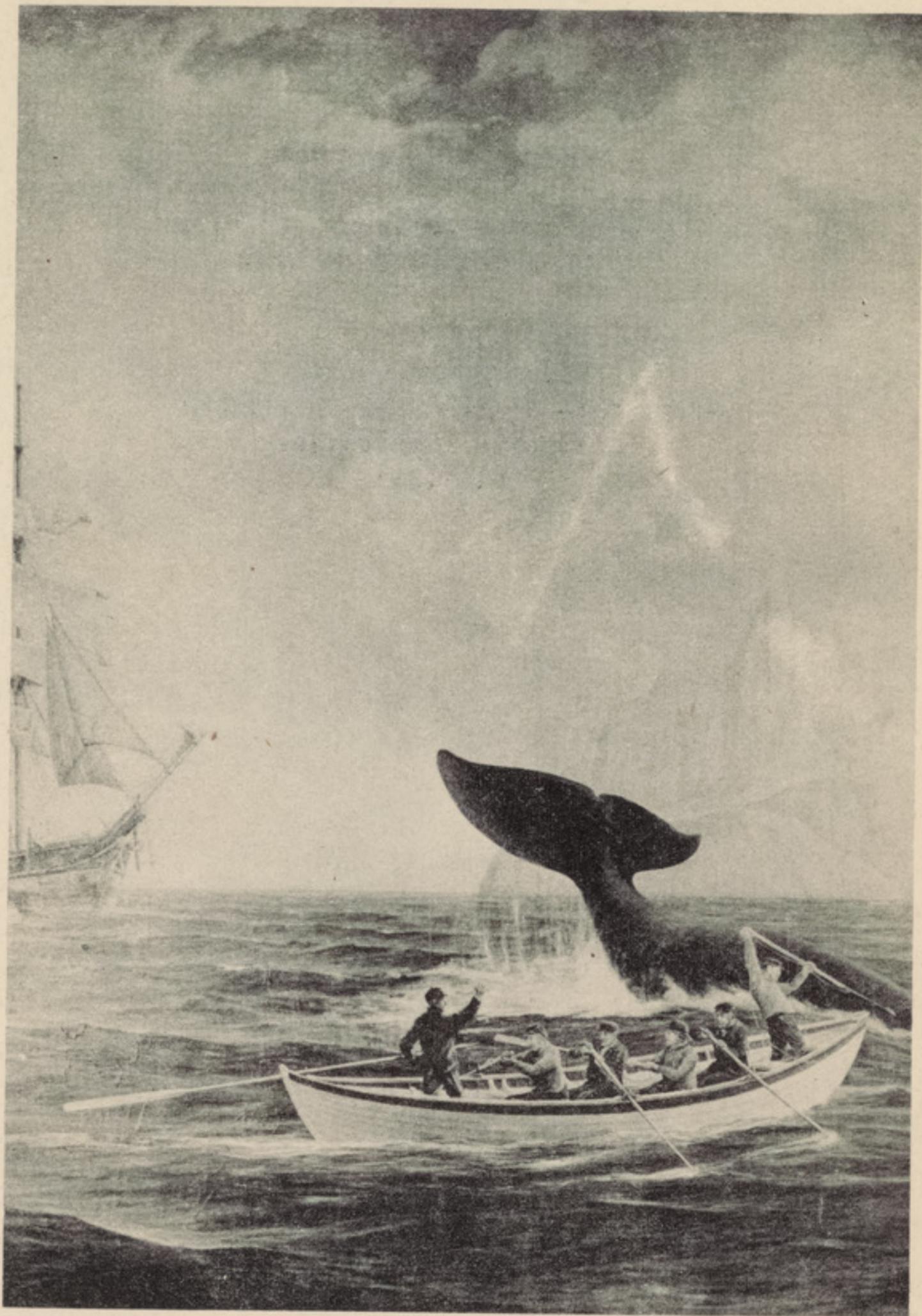
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A Whaling Mural in the Marine Museum
at Mystic of a Polar Whaling Scene

By Thomas Peterson, 1924

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FOREWORD



by



THOMAS A. STEVENS

On August 1st, 1848, William Henry Holmes sailed from Mystic, Connecticut, as first mate of the whaling bark *Sheperdess*, Captain William Benjamin, to cruise in the Pacific Ocean. Due to unfavorable weather which resulted in limited cruising time, the bark had taken only three right whales yielding 250 barrels of oil when she touched at Lahaina, in the Sandwich Islands on April 1st, 1849. From a short letter mailed from there on that date we learn from "Bill" Holmes, the first mate, that the *Sheperdess* had only one day in port and was bound for the Okhotsk Sea on the Russian coast to search for whales.

Word was getting around the Pacific that many whales were to be found in this heretofore untouched whaling ground. In 1843, the New Bedford whaleships *Hercules*, Captain Henry H. Ricketson, and *Janus*, Captain James K. Turner, found whales in abundance on the coast of Kamchatka. In 1847, Captain George A. Covell ventured through the strait of Kuril in the *Mount Vernon* of New Bedford and when in the sea beyond, took a whale which he supposed would yield about 70 barrels. When the blubber was tried out he was amazed to find he had 150. From that time on, the pursuit of the Polar or "Bowhead" whale, as it was later called, was on in earnest.

The polar or bowhead whales found by American whalers on the Kamchatka coast and discovered by Captain Covell in the Okhotsk Sea were of the same species as formerly taken in great numbers by the Dutch and English whalers at Spitzbergen, Greenland and Davis Strait. In 1848, Captain Roys, of the bark *Superior* of Sag Harbor, New York, pushed his way through Bering Strait into the Arctic Ocean and established bowhead whaling in that icy region.

This species of whale was soon found to be the most valuable of the right or whalebone whales, both for the quantity and quality of its oil and for the length and thickness of its baleen.

The *Sheperdess* was on her third voyage as a Mystic whaler. In 1842, Isaac and W. P. Randall purchased the bark at Boston and fitted her out as one of their fleet of Mystic whalers. Built at Medford, Massachusetts, in 1825, the *Sheperdess*, registering 274.3 tons, length 101 feet--9 inches, breadth 22 feet 5 inches, and depth of hold 12 feet-2½ inches, made six voyages altogether as a Mystic whaler. Her first two voyages were under the command of Captain Hiram Clift of Stonington, her third under Captain William Benjamin of Preston and the last three,

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Captain Woodbridge Watrous of New London. She was retired from whaling and sold to Boston owners in 1860.

Few original narratives have been published of this early pursuit of the polar or bowhead whale; practically none from the viewpoint of the first mate of a whaler. The following, with the exception of a few obviously required corrections, is exactly as William Henry Holmes, who could "think of nothing that would be very interesting, so in order to write something" wrote the following brief account of his Cruise in the Okhotsk Sea.



Lahaina, Mowhee
Sandwich Islands
November 1st, 1849

Dear Mother, Brothers & Sisters:

Another opportunity is presented that I may address you by letter. And praying that this letter may find you all enjoying the best of health and prosperity, I take my pen to address you. As for my own health I have never enjoyed better--I have not lost a single watch on deck since I sailed from home. You must make this answer for all of you as I have not much time to write. Neither have I much news that would be interesting to you. I can think of nothing that would be very interesting so in order to write something, I will give you a brief account of our cruise in the Okhotsk Sea.

On the 2nd of April, 1849, we sailed from the Sandwich Islands, bound to the Sea of Okhotsk. On the 11th of May, off Kamchatka, we took a right whale. On the 1st of June, we entered through Busole Strait (Boussole Channel) into the Sachalin or Okhotsk Sea. Busole Strait is a passage through the Coriale (Kuril) Islands. The Coriale (Kuril) Islands are a chain of Islands extending from the southern extremity of Kamchatka to the eastern extremity of Japan, separating the Sea of Sachalin or Okhotsk from the North Pacific Ocean.

After passing this strait we steered a Northward course bound to that portion of the Sea lying in or near the 58th Degree of North Latitude and the 150th Degree of East Longitude where we expected to find plenty whales.

On the 9th of June about sunrise in lat. 57-10, Long. 149-30, the man from the masthead hailed the deck with a report of "There she blows". "Where away and how far off" cried I. "Three points off the weather bow and away in the horizon". I went below for a spyglass to take to the masthead to ascertain more clearly what sort of a whale they had raised. The moment that I arrived on deck, the mast heads hailed again that the horizon was full of spouts ahead, from



four points off the lee bow to four points off the weather bow. My heart sickened for the truth flashed across my mind that instead of whales it was ice they had raised; the next moment I was at the mast head.

Think of my sorrow and disappointment. On the very spot where we expected to find plenty of whales and to fill our ship, the spot for which we had spent ten months of time and taken so much pains to arrive at, through storms and cold to those Northern regions through Busole Strait and the Coriale (Kuril) Isles where but a few years ago navigators thought it more than men's lives and ships were worth to undertake. Then, I say, instead of finding what we came after, to see as far northward as the sight, with the help of the glass could extend--nothing but one vast body or desert of field ice.

For my own part I was almost discouraged for no one knew how long this ice was to remain in our way. Capt. Benjamin had not yet turned out. I went below and told him what I had discovered and he appeared to be more discouraged than myself.

That morning we fell in with two ships, the *NAVY* and the *HUNTRESS* of New Bedford. It was the opinion of their captains that the ice could not remain much after the 20th of June.

We coasted along the ice all day. Saw several fin back whales. In the afternoon spoke the ship *CHARLES PHELPS* of Stonington. She was aboiling--had taken a Polar Whale the day before. We lay near the ice all night. Next day took a gale of wind and considering it unsafe to remain as long as the ice remained there, we bore away to the S. E. with the intention of cruising along the coast of Kamchatka. After running two or three days, made the land. Cruised for a few days along the shore but saw no whales. One pleasant day lowered away the boats and went on shore out of curiosity. We effected a landing in the afternoon and saw several of the inhabitants. They appeared civil and friendly but we could not converse much with them as neither could speak the other's language.



After spending a few hours on the shore we returned on board of the ship and bore away for the place where we had left the ice. On the 17th we again raised the ice ahead. In the afternoon as we were coasting along I was at the masthead; I saw a whale blowing about a mile from and another very near the ice. I saw that their spout was altogether different from any whale I had ever seen. I told Capt. Benjamin that I thought they were Polar whales and he was of the same opinion. The whales were by this time about two miles apart. We lowered away the boats, the Captain pulling for the whale farthest from the ice; the mate and myself pulled for the one near the ice. We agreed before we separated that if either of us was fortunate enough to strike the whales that the first boat was to set a signal that the other might know and go to her assistance.

We then separated, the Captain charging us that if we got fast and the whale should run into the ice, to cut from him, as being towed into the ice the boats would be stove to pieces and the crew lost. I pulled to the ice where I saw the whale and hove up, the 2nd mate doing the same. After lying in that position for near half an hour the whale made his appearance; he was about half a mile from me and very near Mr. Benjamin, the second mate. We both pulled for him. I saw that with half a dozen good strokes with the oars that he would be on to the whale. I got out my signal to signalize the Captain. At that moment, the boat steerer stood up for the whale and hurried two irons deep in his back.

The whale settled a few fathoms under water where he remained a few moments and then started with great fury directly toward the ice, running under me, and bringing Mr. Benjamin's boat with great violence in contact with mine, unshipping my steering oar and sweeping all of the oars off one side of my boat. I collected my oars as soon as possible and with a piece of towline refastened my steering oar. But by this time, the whale had taken Mr. Benjamin's line and disappeared in the ice. I pulled a short distance into the ice but saw no more of the whale. On my return, I saw another near the ice but deemed it useless to



fasten to him with only one line as Mr. Benjamin had lost his, so I waited until the Captain arrived. I told him what had happened and that there was another whale nearby which would be up presently and that I had waited for him considering it of no use striking one of those whales with the line.

These whales behave altogether different from any other species of whales. They resemble the right whale more than any other but are different from them. When they are first struck they sound very deep, generally to the bottom, and can to all appearances remain there as long as they like without coming to the surface to blow. I have known them to remain under water an hour and a half, consequently they cannot be taken by one boat where there is great depth of water, and not at all off soundings. I have seen some of them take nearly all three of our lines, their length being 600 fathoms. When one boat gets fast the others go to him as quick as possible, the first that gets there binds his line to the line that is fast to the whale and the next to his. The whale generally goes to the bottom and remains some time, but when he again comes to the surface he is very quiet for a short time. Then the loose boats go on to him and with the lance kill him. They are a singular whale and are found only in the polar seas.

After the Captain arrived a whale made his appearance about a half mile off. I pulled for him but he went down before I got there. Captain Benjamin remained where he was. About the time that my whale went down one came up within a ship's length of him. He waited for me and then went on to him. I pulled away for him and had to skim the ice, for there was plenty where we then were. Before I could reach him the whale had taken his line. I went into the ice with the hope that the whale would come up near me, and we either had a chance to kill him or to catch the line that was fast to him, which I might have done, as there was a buoy drag bent to the line.

I went some way into the ice but saw no more of that whale. I worked my way into the ice about two miles where I came to a ridge or solid body of ice



that was impenetrable. By standing on the wales of the boat I could see over this ridge and there I saw ten or twelve large polar whales, all lying motionless like logs upon the water. Oh, think of my anxiety and vexation. There within my sight and before me lay a plenty of large whales but out of my reach. Yes, this was a beautiful scene. The ice was of a clear white. The day too was very clear. The sun's bright rays shone so bright and clear upon the ice as to cause a reflection that dazzled the sight, while here and there the scene was dotted with the huge black monsters of the deep. And carelessly lying about on the ice was to be seen great numbers of seals making their solumn and dismal moan.

Northward 150 miles distant was to be seen the Russian mountains with their snow and icy tops glittering in the sun's bright rays, and their lofty peaks seemed piercing to the very sky. And many volcanoes pouring forth volumes of fire and smoke; while the moan of the seals and the ice as it rolled together by the heave of the sea causing a continued rumbling sound imitating that of distant thunder.

This scene to the eye was grand and sublime but to the ear awful dismal in the extreme. I stood and gazed around paralyzed and perfectly carried away with this scene. Absorbed in my own thought, for some time I was not conscious of my position. My thoughts had wandered but wither had they strayed--to my most near and dear friends. Yes, oh could they, I thought, but witness this beautiful scene, the beautiful works of the Almighty supreme. Many people might have viewed this scene and would see nothing remarkable in it to ever give it a second thought. Perhaps not one in ten that would have been struck with its singular beauties like Henry Stewart, my boat steerer and myself. He seemed to be as sensitive of this scene as myself. He was the first to break the silence by exclaiming "Is not this grand and beautifull." This remark aroused me to my situation. I looked around me once more and upon my boat crew. They, although a bold set of young men, seemed to tremble with fear and to look up to me as though they depended entirely upon my self-possession and judgment as their leader and guide. Beset with



danger on every side, the ice as it rolled to and fro seemed each moment to threaten the destruction of the boat. Those were the proudest moments of my life.

After satisfying my curiosity, I picked my way out of the ice and returned to the ship. The remainder of the day was spent in coiling new lines and refitting boats, etc. The next morning at sun rise found me at the mast head where I remained about a half an hour and during that time I saw at least fifty Polar whales, one a good distance from the ice. We lowered away but did not have a chance to strike until near noon. About noon struck a large Polar whale and at two o'clock had him alongside of the ship and commenced cutting. Finished cutting at 10.

Next morning we lowered away for a whale at half past two o'clock. You may think this rather early rising but in these high north latitudes the sun rises at three o'clock and sets at nine, consequently there is daylight to be seen the whole 24 hours at this time of year. Before the twilight is gone in the west it can be seen in the east. And when the sky is clear one can see to read coarse print at any time of night, that is, on deck. As I was saying, we were clear of the ship before three o'clock, but a dreadful accident happened to us that day by which we lost one of our best men from the forecastle.

About one hour after we lowered the whale came up near the Captain. He went on and fastened to him. The whale struck at the same time breaking several of his oars but hurting no one and then went down. I, being nearer to him than the 2nd mate, pulled to him and bent my line to his. The 2nd mate pulled off a short distance from us in the direction that we supposed the whale would come up, and there lay on his oars. We had to wait but a few moments when the whale came up directly under his boat and striking very violently at the same time. We heard the crash and saw a great quantity of white water and several broken oars flying in the air and when all was still again I came to the conclusion that the boat was not stove and that the crash we heard was the breaking of oars. But the next moment Mr. Benjamin's boatsteerer called to us and



said, "We have a dead man in our boat." The Captain asked me what it was best to do; if I thought it best to cut off from the whale or not. I told him that I thought he had better take Mr. Benjamin's boat and go on board with the man for he could take care of him just as well as though we all were there and that I would take care of the whale.

The whale was now up again. I pulled away for him and met Mr. Benjamin on the way. As we passed each other I saw at a glance that the poor fellow without a doubt was dead. He was a shocking sight to behold. He was placed in a sitting position with his back against the gunwhale of the boat with his face toward me as I passed. The blood was streaming from his eyes, nose and mouth and his brain from his ears. He was struck about the head--his forehead was stove in and his skull broken. The poor fellow never knew what hurt him. I went on to the whale and with my first lance had the success to set him spouting blood and he soon turned up. I took him alongside of the ship at 8 o'clock. When I got on board the corpse was laid out and buried at eight o'clock next morning. He was a fine young man and the best man that I ever saw on board of a ship. This death was lamented by the whole ship's company.

From June 17th to July 4th we took five polar and one right whale. The six whales made about 1000 barrels of oil. Had the whaling continued two weeks longer the ship would have been full but it was not our good fortune to fill our ship so early, for about the 5th or 6th of July, the ice disappeared and the whales with it.

All the month of July we had very bad weather, thick fogs, rain, snow and gales of wind. We cruised across the sea from shore to shore from Kamchatka to the coast of Russia and as far southward as Independent Tartary and saw no more whales until the first of September. On the sixth, near night we lowered for three whales. A short time after we lowered I struck the largest whale that I ever saw. Oh, he was a tremendous whale, but we killed him and took him alongside about 10 o'clock that night. He was not very fat but made 275 bbls. of oil; and had he been fat he would have made over 300.



On the 13th of July, fell in with the ship *ROMULUS* of Mystic and gammed with Mr. Andrews. We were together the most part of a night and had a fust rate time and received the letters with much joy. I had just about given up ever seeing anyone that had letters or knew what letters were. Mr. Andrews was well. They had at the time 700 bbls. but I heard of her the last of the season with 1100 bbls. Heard of the *HELLESPONT* (of Mystic) with 600 bbls.

I had almost forgotten to tell you of an excursion we had on the coast of Russia. Sometime in August we were cruising along that coast very near the land and supposing that the whales must be close in shore as we could not find them off shore. One pleasant morning Capt. Benjamin requested that I should take two boats and pull in shore to ascertain whether there were any whales there or not. The ship was about twelve miles from the land. Well, in I went and saw three whales going very quick to the southward. I gave chase but could not come up with them and so at night pulled back to the ship. Next morning went in shore with three boats but saw no whales. The sea being very smooth we run on shore about noon, landed in one of the pleasantest valleys that I ever saw. It seemed very refreshing; everything looked green and growing thrifty. The valley was bounded with very high and rugged mountains. We saw no people but saw several bears. Some were black and others a sort of yellow or brown color. Returned on board at night and bore away from the land.

On the 26th of September we left the Sea of Okhotsk bound to the Sandwich Islands. The 26th was a pleasant day with a fine westerly gale. As we passed out through Busole Strait, the Coriole (Kuril) Islands appeared beautifull. The most of them are volcanic, some of them having two or three volcanoes; the fire and smoke as it burst forth made a strange and beautiful appearance.

We had a very unpleasant voyage to the Sandwich Islands. Had four very heavy gales of wind. We likewise buried one of our men on the passage. He was taken sick about the time we left the Sea and died the 3rd of October.



When we sailed from home it was our expectation to take oil enough to send us home in one season, but I am sorry to have to inform you that our anticipations have not been realized. Although we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have improved every moment for what time we have had to take oil. The whaling was very good indeed for what time it lasted, but its duration was very short. For the last two seasons, there have been so many ships cruising in that Sea that the whaling has been very bad. This season there has been from sixty five to seventy ships cruising from the middle of May to the twenty fifth of September in the Okhotsk, and the general average of their oil is from six to eight hundred barrels, and out of this number of ships we have heard of only one that has taken as much oil as the *SHEPERDESS*; we have now about 1500 barrels.

The following I wish to have published in the Norwich papers:

Killed by a Polar whale on the 18th of June 1849 in Lat. 57-40 North, Long. 151-00 East, Okhotsk Sea, Charles M. Holmes, alias Charles Marks, aged 27 years or thereabouts. A seaman on board Barque *SHEPERDESS* of Mystic, Conn. and a native of New York. New York papers please copy.

Died: Oct. 3rd, 1849 on board Barque *SHEPERDESS* of Mystic, Ct. at sea, Lat. 43-45 N., Long. 166-10 E., Thomas Wood, Seaman, aged 19 years or thereabouts. A native of Middletown, Conn.

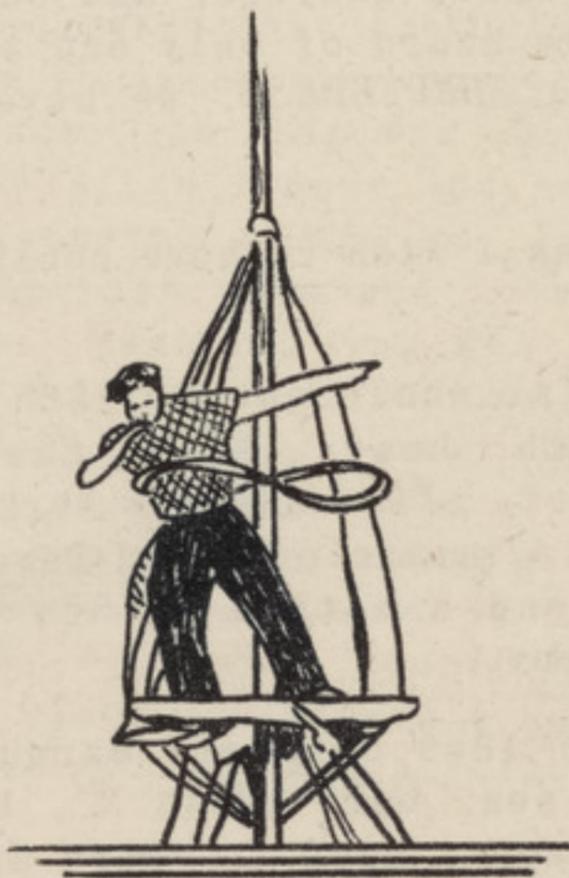
You must excuse the bad spelling and penmanship of this letter for I am very much engaged and have to write as fast as I can. Let no one but my most intimate friends see this letter as I am ashamed of the penmanship. Give my respects to all inquiring friends and tender my kind regards to Mr. & Mrs. Leonard and Mrs. Andrews and to Mr. Mapes, tell that when I do ever come around that way again that I shall be sure to fetch that cart rope I promised him and so, farewell.

Yours, etc.,

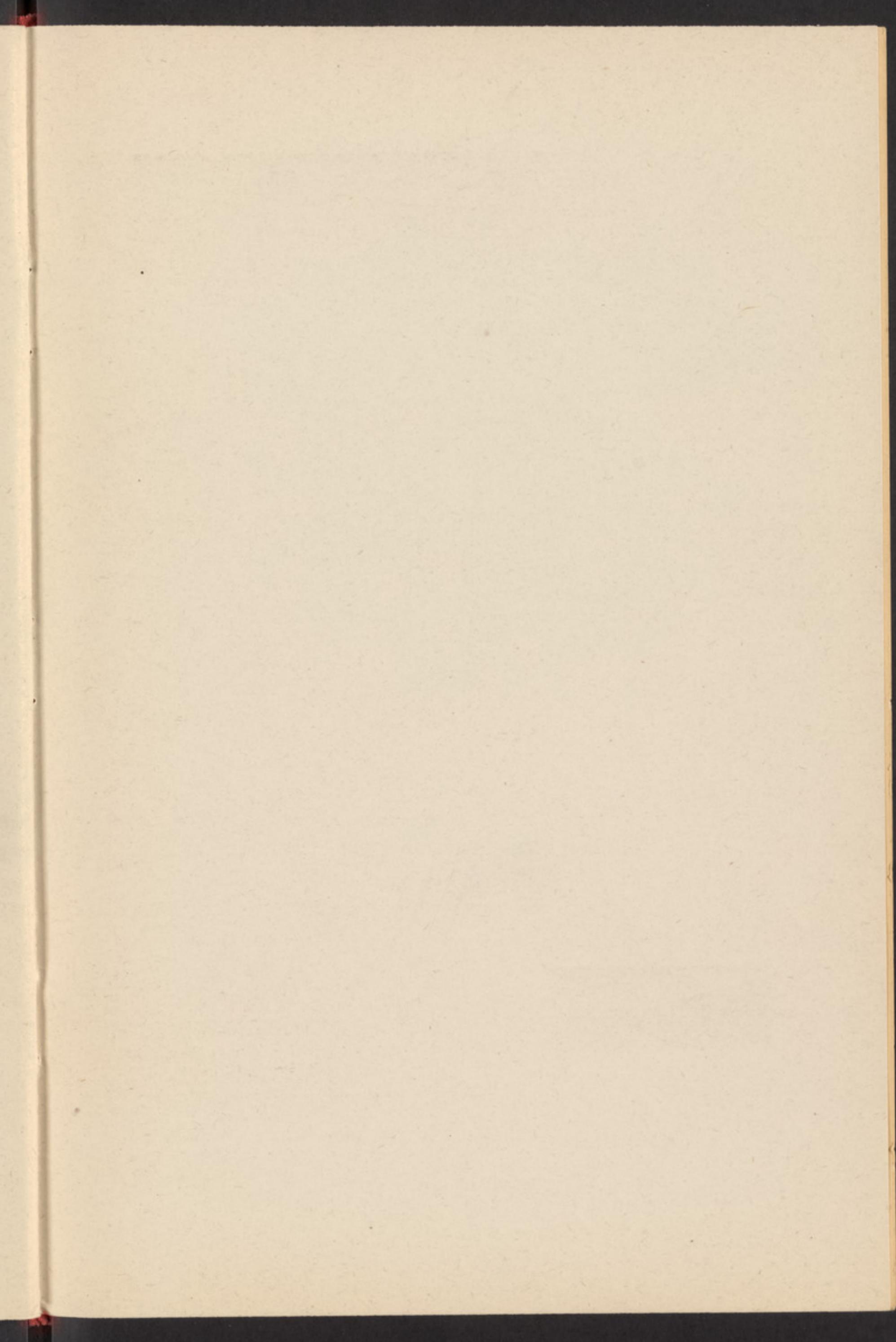
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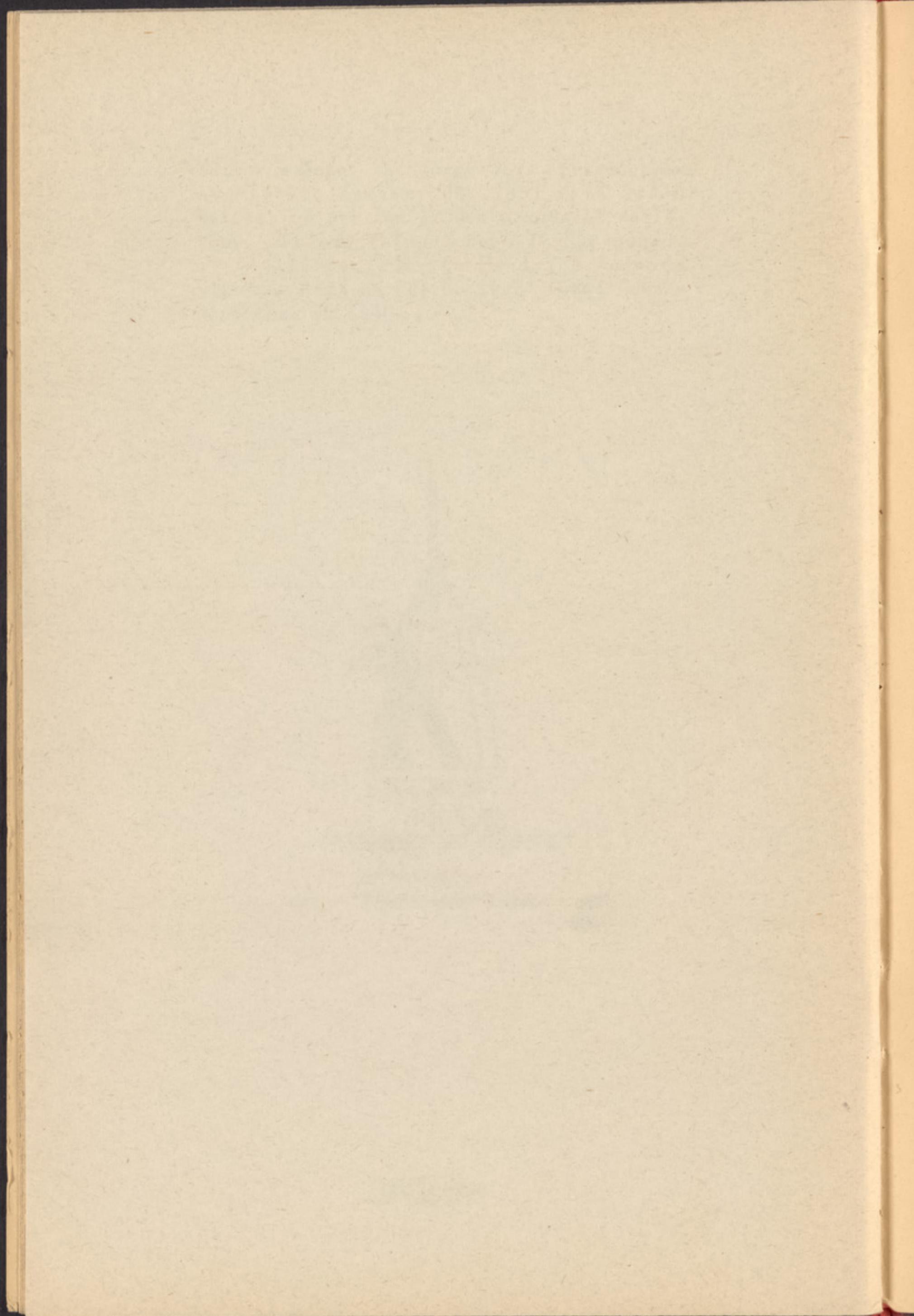


Editor's Note: The *Sheperdess* arrived home at Mystic, January 28, 1851 with 2,300 barrels of oil and 12,000 pounds of whalebone. She had shipped home 17,500 pounds of whalebone from the Sandwich Islands when she left on her homeward bound voyage September 4, 1850.

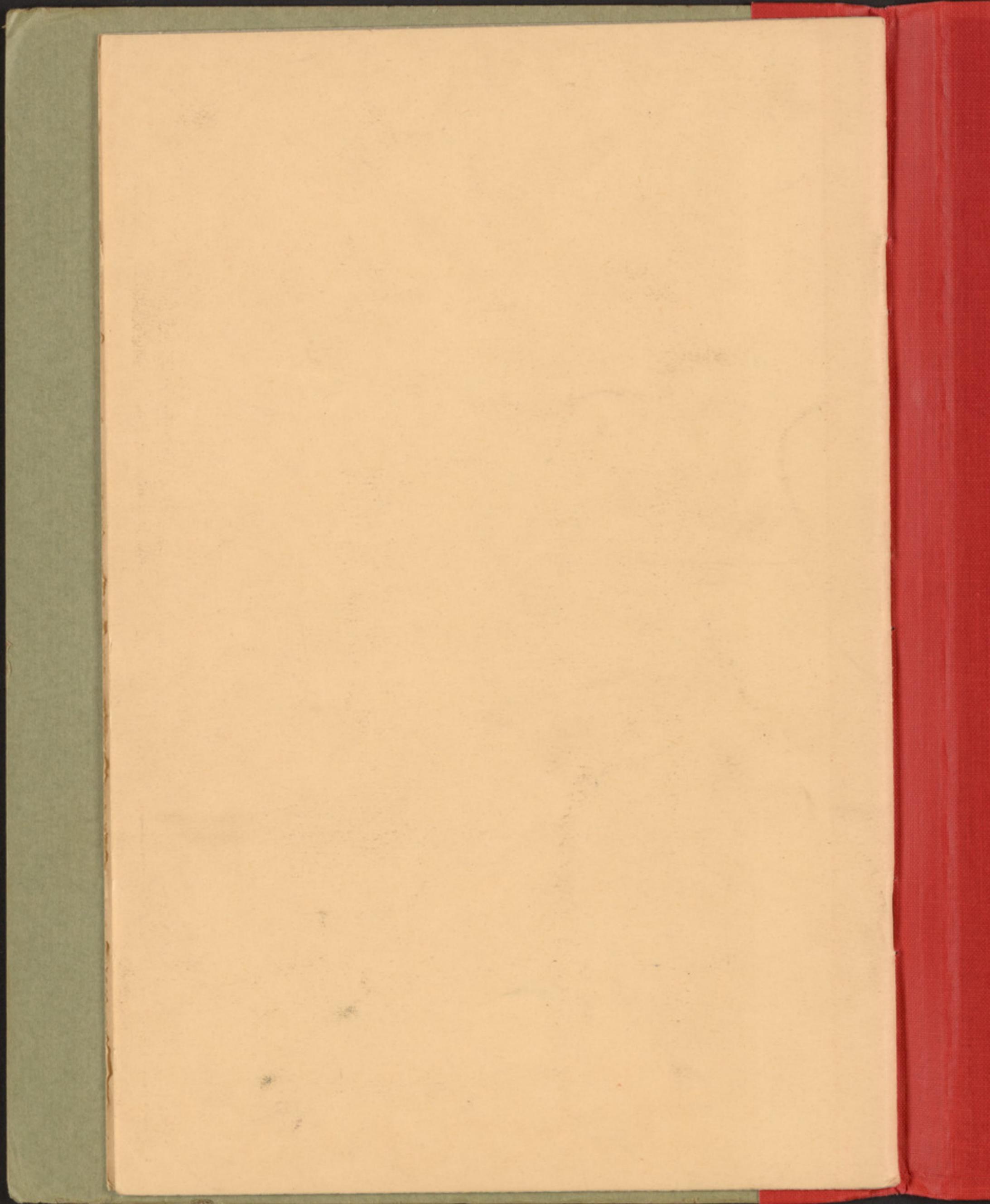


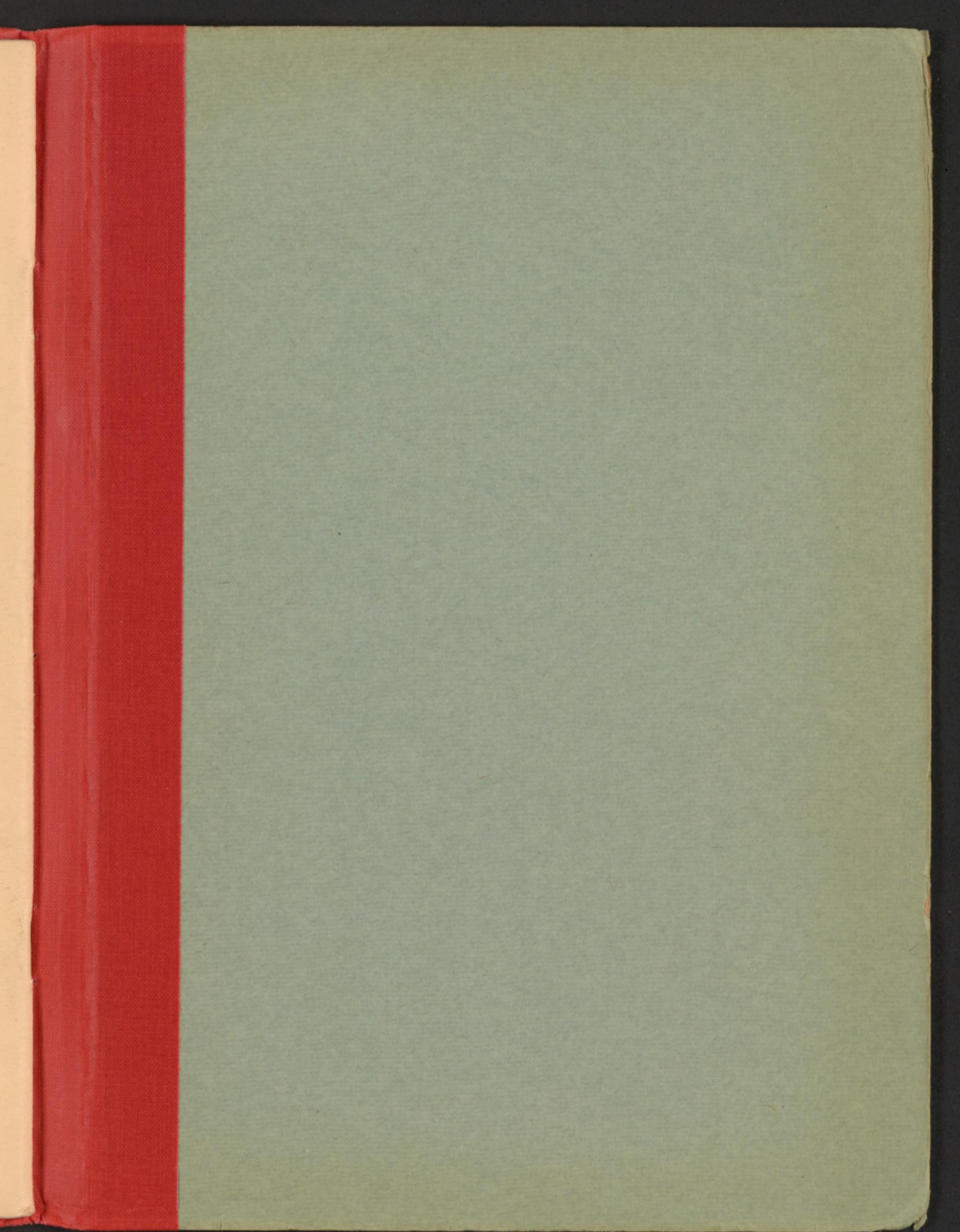
"There she blows"











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