

Moby Dick

By Herman Melville

II

Each day the sky grew less gloomy, and each day we saw a little more of captain Ahab before he retreated to his cabin again. At last, the good weather seemed to charm his grim mood. More than once he gave a look which, in any other man, would soon have flowered out in a smile.

Captain Ahab and the three mates ate in the captain's cabin. The officers were like little children as they waited for Ahab to serve their food. No one spoke. When the officers had finished eating, the harpooners were allowed into the captain's cabin to eat what was left. Queequeg, Tashtego and Daggoo ate with relish and rough humor, in total contrast to the restraint shown by the officers.

The **masthead** was manned while we cruised to our hunting grounds. Southern whale ships have no crow's nests like the Greenland whalers. For your masthead-watch, you perch at the head of the topgallant mast, standing on two thin sticks, which are the topgallant cross trees. Here, tossed about by the sea, the beginner feels about as cozy as he would standing on a bull's horns. I frankly admit that, clinging to the mast over a tossing sea, I kept a poor ground.

One morning, Ahab came up the cabin gangway to the deck. Soon his steady, ivory-leg tread was heard going to and fro. The hours wore on.

"Mark him, Flask," whispered Stubb: the chick that's in him pecks the shell. It will soon be out."

It drew near the close of day. Suddenly Ahab halted by the bulwarks, and inserted his bone leg into the hole there. With one hand grasping the rope, he ordered Starbuck to send everybody **aft**.

“Sir!” Said the mate, astonished at the order, which is *never* given on ship-board unless something extraordinary has happened.

“Send everybody aft! repeated Ahab. Mast heads, there! Come down!”

Soon the entire ships company were eyeing him apprehensively. He looked like the weather horizon when a storm is coming up.

Ahab’s eyes darted among the crew. Then he cried: “What do you do when ye see a whale, men?”

“Sing out for him!” Came a score of voices.

“Good! And what do ye do next, men?”

“Lower away and after him!”

“And what tune is it ye pull to, men?”

“A dead whale, or a **stove boat!**”

The old man seemed strangely excited.

“Look ye! D’ye see this Spanish ounce of gold?”— he held up a bright coin to the sun —“It’s a sixteen-dollar piece, men. D’ye see it? Mr Starbuck, hand me yon top-maul!”

Starbuck handed him a hammer. Captain Ahab stood at the mainmast with the hammer uplifted in one hand, showing us the gold he held in the other. “Whoever raises me a white whale with crinkled brow and a crooked jaw – whoever raises me that white headed whale with three harpoon holes in his starboard fluke – Look ye – whoever raises me that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce, my boys!”

“Huzza! Huzza!” cried the seamen, as captain Ahab nailed the gold piece to the mast.

“It’s a white whale, I say,” said Ahab, throwing down the hammer. “Skin your eyes for him. If ye see but a bubble, sing out!”

All this while Tashtego, Daggoo, and Queequeg looked on with even more surprised than the rest, as if Ahab's words reminded them of something.

"Captain Ahab," said Tashtego, "that white whale must be the same that some men call Moby Dick."

"Moby Dick?" shouted Ahab. "Do ye know the white whale then, Tash?"

"Does he fantail a little curious, sir, before he goes down?" asked Tashtego deliberately.

"And has he a curious spout too?" asked Daggoo.

"And he have one, two, three – oh – A good many irons in his hide too, captain," cried Queequeg.

"Ay, Queequeg!" cried Ahab. "The harpoons lie all twisted and wrenched in him. Aye, Daggoo, his spout is a big one, white as a pile of Nantucket wool. Aye, Tashtego, he fantails like a split jib in a squall. Men, it *is* Moby Dick ye have seen! Moby Dick!"

"Captain Ahab," said Starbuck, "I have heard of Moby Dick. Was it not Moby Dick that took off thy leg?"

"Who told thee that?" Ahab paused. "Aye, Starbuck. Aye, my hearties all round. It *was* Moby Dick that dismasted me. Moby Dick brought me to this dead stump I stand on now." Suddenly he gave a great animal sob like a heart-stricken moose. "Aye, it was that accursed white whale that made a poor pegging lubber of me forever and a day! And that's what ye've shipped for, men! To chase that white whale over all the earth till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye men? Will ye splice hands on it now? I think ye do look brave!"

"Aye, aye," they shouted, running closer to the excited old man. "A sharp eye for the white whale! A sharp lance for Moby Dick!"

"God bless ye," sobbed Ahab. "Steward, draw the men a measure of grog! But what's this long face about Mr Starbuck? Art thou not game for Moby Dick?"

“I came here to hunt whales, Captain Ahab,’ said Starbuck, because that’s our business I didn’t come to take vengeance on a dumb animal. The whale **smote** thee from blind instinct. Madness! To be angry with a dumb animal, Captain Ahab, seems **blasphemous**.”

But Ahab would not listen to Starbuck Again he shouted for grog for the men, and called upon them to keep watch for the white whale with their weapons ready. “Death to Moby Dick!” He cried. “God hunt us all, if we don't hunt Moby Dick to his death!”

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew. My shouts had gone up with the rest, but there was dread in my soul. What the white whale was to Ahab has been hinted. What he was to *me* as yet remains unsaid.

Ahab knew that Starbuck was against this mad search for Moby Dick. The others had been won over by the promise of gold. Often, as the Pequod roamed the seas in search of Moby Dick, Ahab’s voice was heard hailing the mastheads, telling them to keep a bright lookout. This **vigilance** was not long without reward.

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It was a cloudy, sultry afternoon. The seamen were lazily lounging about the decks. Queequeg and I were weaving extra lashing to the boat. A strange dreaminess hung over the ship and all over the sea.

“There she blows! There! She blows! She blows!” The unearthly cry came from Tashtego at the masthead.

“Where-away?”

“On the lee-beam. Two miles off! A school of them!”

Instantly all was commotion. The cranes were thrust out. The three crews’ boats swung over the sea like baskets over high cliffs. The crews clung to the rail, one foot on the gunwale ready to leap into the boats. But suddenly every eye was taken from the whales. With a start, all glared at dark Ahab. He was surrounded by five **dusky** phantoms that seemed fresh formed out of the air.

The **phantoms** flitted on the deck, casting loose the captain's boat. The figure at its bows was tall and dark, wearing a black Chinese jacket and wide black trousers. But crowning this blackness was the glistening white of his living hair, coiled like a turban round and round his head. The ship's company gazed wonderingly upon these strangers.

Ahab cried out to the white-turbaned old man. "All ready there, Fedallah?"

"Ready!" was the half-hissed reply.

"Lower away then!"

In spite of our amazement we sprang over the rail. The sheaves whirled in the blocks. The three boats dropped into the sea. The sailors leapt down the rolling ship's side into the tossed boats below.

Hardly had they pulled out from under the ship's **lee** than the five strangers, coming from the windward side pulled round under the **stern**.

Ahab was at the steering oar. He hailed Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask to spread the boats widely.

"Pull, pull, my fine Hearts," said Stubb to his crew, as he loungingly managed his steering oar. "What is it you stare at? Those chaps in yon boat? Ha! They're only five more hands to help us! Never mind from where! Devils are good fellows enough. Pull, will ye? Pull!"

But as Stubb's boat passed Starbuck's, Stubb called across the water, "What think ye of those yellow boys, sir?"

"They were smuggled aboard before the ship sailed ... a sad business, Mr. Stubb. The white whale is at the bottom of it. Can't be helped. Give way, men. It ain't the white whale today! Give way!"

(I recalled the mysterious shadows I'd seen creeping aboard the Pequod on that dim morning in Nantucket, and the hints dropped by the sailor who had spoken to us on the quay.)

The whales had gone down into the blue. There was no sign of them. Queequeg stood in the bows of Starbuck's boat, his harpoon poised. In Ahab's boat, Fedallah stood in the bows with his harpoon.

Tashtego, the harpooner in Stubb's boat, cried out suddenly, "There they are!" A landsman would only have seen a troubled bit of greenish-white water and a few puffs of vapor. The boats tore towards it. Our boat ran into a mist. Neither ship nor boat could be seen.

Queequeg, harpoon in hand, sprang to his feet. "That's his hump! There! Give it to him!"

A short rushing sound leaped from the boat – the darted iron of Queequeg. The boat seemed to strike a ledge. The sail collapsed and exploded. A gush of scalding vapor shot up nearby. Something rolled and tumbled like an earthquake beneath us. We were tossed helter-skelter into the white curdling cream of the **squall**. Squall, whale and harpoon all blended together. The whale, merely gazed by the iron, escaped.

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The wonder of the stowaway phantoms soon **waned** away, although hair-turban Fedallah remained a muffled mystery to the last. He was linked with Ahab's peculiar fortunes in some way, but what this was, none knew.

Days, weeks passed, under easy sail. We swept across the cruising grounds of the Atlantic and were south of St. Helena.

One serene and moonlight night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver, a silver jet was seen far ahead of the white bubbles at the bow. Lit by the moon, it looked like a glittering god arising from the sea. On these moonlight nights, Fedallah stood lookout at the mainmast head. Not one whaleman in a hundred would think of lowering the boats by night, so you can imagine what the men felt when they saw Fedallah perched aloft at such unusual hours, his turban and the moon companions in one sky.

So when he cried out, "There she blows!" the mortal crew below quivered with excitement.

Ahab commanded the top-gallant sails and royals to be set, and every stun-sail spread. The ship rolled down before the wind. Yet the silvery jet was no more seen that night.

Some days after, at the same silent hour, the silver jet was seen again. Once again, upon making sail to overtake it, it disappeared as if it had never been. And so it served us night after night, till no one heeded it but to wonder at it. But this solitary jet seemed to be forever alluring us on, as we rounded cape horn amidst howling winds and set our course for **Java**.

One transparent blue morning, Daggoo at the masthead saw a great white mass lazily arise in the distance. It glistened like snow for a moment, then sank. Was this Moby Dick? When it re-appeared, he was sure. He yelled out, "There! There again! There she breaches! The white whale! The white whale! The white whale!"

The seamen rushed to the yard arms. Soon four boats were on the water. All swiftly pulled towards their prey. The white mass rose again – no whale, but a vast pulpy cream-colored mass floating in the water. With a low sucking sound, it slowly disappeared again.

Starr said wildy, "I'd rather have fought Moby Dick than have seen that white ghost!"

'What was it, sir?' asked Flask.

"The great squid. Few have seen it and lived to tell the tale."

Ahab said nothing. Turning his boat, he sailed back to the ship. The rest followed silently.

For long days, we cruised the Pacific Ocean. Starbuck harpooned a sperm whale, which towed his boat so it flew through the water, every man clinging to his seat. At last, the wounded whale slackened his flight. Stubb darted dart after dart into its flesh until a red tide poured from the monster like brooks down a hill.

Jet after jet of white smoke agonizingly shot from the blowhole of the whale. The monster wallowed in his blood., lashing up mad boiling spray, in which the boat was almost engulfed. At last, gush after gush of clotted blood shot into the frightened air. The whale rolled into view, motionless. His heart had burst!

"He's dead, Mr Stubb," said Daggoo.

Stubb relished whale meat for his supper.

The next day, using the enormous cutting tackles to bring up the blubber strip by strip. Then the remains of the white carcass were cast off, and the huge head, full of valuable **spermaceti** was hung from the ship's side.

We sailed on, occasionally meeting other ships. When he had the chance, Ahab asked the other captains if they'd sighted the white whale. No one had until we met an English captain with only one arm. In place of the other was a long sperm-whale bone.

"Hast seen the white whale?" asked Ahab, as soon as he'd boarded the English ship.

"See you this?" The English captain showed his bone arm. "The white whale was the cause, last season. We had him harpooned, but this old grandfather whale, with the white tail and hump, came snapping at the boat in two with flukes. I clung to the line, but the harpoon caught me and the barb ripped my arm off."

"Didst thou cross the white whale's wake again?"

"Twice."

"But could not fasten?"

"Didn't want to try. Ain't one limb enough? He's best let alone. Don't you think so?"

"How long since thou saw him last? Which way heading?"

"Why ... east, I think."

But as Ahab struggled back to the ship's boat, hampered by his whalebone leg, the English captain whispered to Fedallah, "Is your captain mad?"