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opening extract from

Moby Dick

written by

Herman Melville

illustrated by

Patrick Benson

published by

Walker Books Ltd

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A Note by Jan Needle... The story you are about to embark on is taken from the enormous novel published in 1851 by a former sailor named Herman Melville. For reasons of length it has been edited – cut to the bone, one might even say – with passages of summary and commentary in italics, for the sake of clarity. Although Melville's novel is a work of fiction, he presented it as the true account of the extraordinary last voyage of the whaling ship Pequod, written by another sailor known only as "Ishmael" – an outcast and wanderer in the Bible. Much of the original is long and rambling, not to say obscure – while other parts are wonderfully exciting. For Ishmael was not just a humble seaman, but a survivor and a thinker who saw great significance in what happened to the ship.



There are echoes, in the manuscript, of other famous disasters in the whaling trade. In 1820, for instance, the Nantucket ship Essex was rammed and sunk by a furious sperm whale – an extremely rare occurrence. Her twenty officers and men set out in three small boats to try and reach the coast of South America, thousands of miles away, and only eight survived. For Melville, who heard it from the son of the Essex's first mate, the tragedy of a ship sent to destroy whales being destroyed by one itself was heavy with dark and secret meanings.

As Ishmael, Melville tells us about a whaling captain who is "a terrible old man", and "mad" and "tragic". His name is Ahab – a wicked name, according to the text, and the name of a king who did great wrong in the sight of the Lord, according to the Bible. Ahab has lost his leg in fighting a whale that seems to him the embodiment of evil, despite the fact – perhaps because of it – that unlike any other, this whale is white. What's more, Captain Ahab is certain that the attack was quite deliberate, and is prepared to go to any lengths to get revenge. Although the owners of the Pequod – and her crew – thought their ship had set sail to hunt and slaughter many whales, for the captain, we realize at last, there was only one worth catching. He had set out, simply, to destroy it, or die in the attempt. It was the thing that drove him onward.

Ishmael was on the voyage, and he alone survived. But over the years, his account has become a classic that reveals a myriad of meanings, not just for America, but wherever people read and ponder on the mysteries of humankind. Each reader will bring new ideas, which others might dispute with equal fervour, and the commentary in this version inevitably presents my own perspective as an Englishman who knows and loves the book – and the sea – with passion. But Melville's novel of the whale called Moby Dick is beyond time and place. It is a story for the world.

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago, having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself pausing before coffin warehouses—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.



Chapter One

Loomings

Why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea? Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. That same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

Now, when I say that I am in the habit of going to sea whenever I begin to grow hazy about the eyes, and begin to be over conscious of my lungs, I do not mean to have it inferred that I ever go to sea as a passenger. Passengers get sea-sick—grow quarrelsome—don't sleep of nights—do not enjoy themselves, as a general thing. Nor, though I am something of a salt, do I ever go to sea

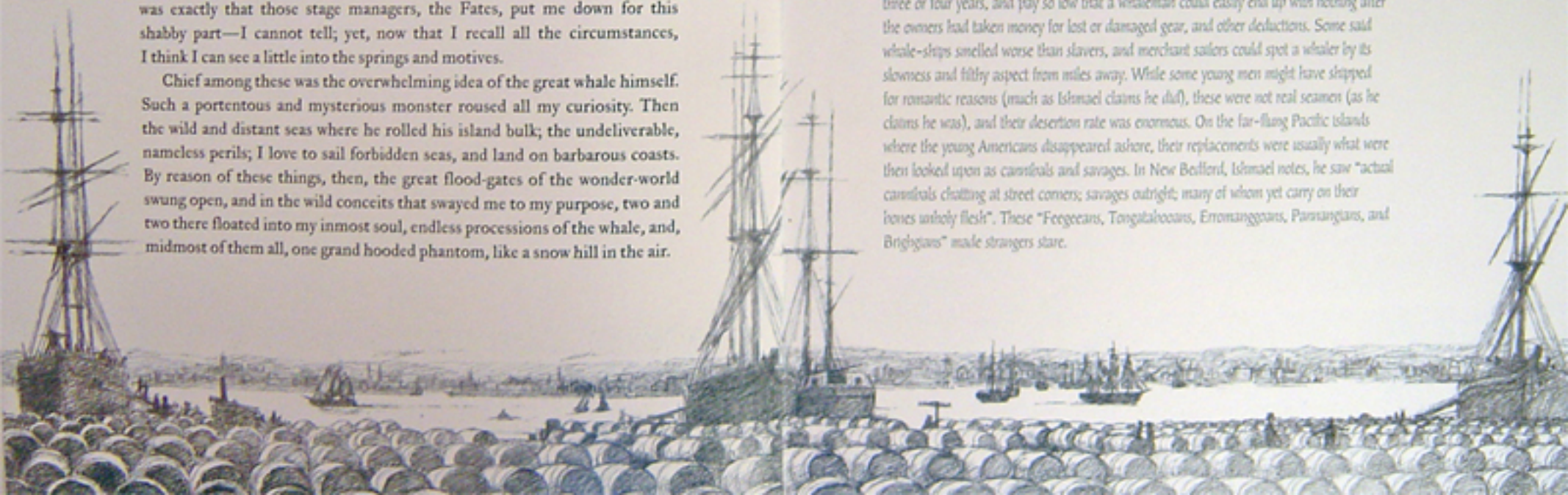


as a Commodore, or a Captain, or a Cook. No, I go as a simple sailor, right before the mast, plumb down into the forecastle, aloft there to the royal mast-head. True, they rather order me about some, and make me jump from spar to spar, like a grasshopper in a May meadow, and at first, this sort of thing is unpleasant enough. But this wears off in time. Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything the less of me, because I obey? Who ain't a slave? Tell me that.

Again, I always go to sea as a sailor, because they make a point of paying me for my trouble, whereas they never pay passengers a single penny that I ever heard of. On the contrary, passengers themselves must pay. But wherefore it was that after having repeatedly smelt the sea as a merchant sailor, I should now take it into my head to go on a whaling voyage, why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part—I cannot tell; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives.

Chief among these was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity. Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the undeliverable, nameless perils; I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts. By reason of these things, then, the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air.

Ishmael, having come to his decision, stuffed a shirt or two into his carpet bag, and "started for Cape Horn and the Pacific". He sailed from New York to New Bedford, which by the 1850s was the world's greatest whaling port, and from there to the island of Nantucket, which he tells us was "the place where the first dead American whale was stranded" and from where the Native Americans ("the Red-Men") began the industry that by the time of his voyage was one of the country's greatest and richest. It was not for food that whales were hunted, but for products that were far more valuable – a strong and flexible horn-like substance known as whalebone, and the oil obtained by boiling down their fat, or "blubber". Before the discovery of oil that could be pumped out of the ground, whaling provided the bulk of the world's lighting oil, as well as lubrication for machines. Whatever his reasons for obscuring his real name, Ishmael was almost certainly being less than frank about why he chose to go whaling. For most sailors it was a job of last resort, with voyages that could last three or four years, and pay so low that a whaleman could easily end up with nothing after the owners had taken money for lost or damaged gear, and other deductions. Some said whale-ships smelled worse than slavers, and merchant sailors could spot a whaler by its slowness and filthy aspect from miles away. While some young men might have shipped for romantic reasons (much as Ishmael claims he did), these were not real seamen (as he claims he was), and their desertion rate was enormous. On the far-flung Pacific islands where the young Americans disappeared ashore, their replacements were usually what were then looked upon as cannibals and savages. In New Bedford, Ishmael notes, he saw "actual cannibals chatting at street corners; savages outright; many of whom yet carry on their bones unholy flesh". These "Feegeeans, Tongataboobans, Erromangoans, Pannangians, and Brighgians" made strangers stare.



America, at this time, was still afflicted by the shame of slavery, but men who worked on ships – even "actual cannibals" – were almost always free. Whatever else he was, Ishmael was in no way what would be called a racist nowadays. In New Bedford, at the Spouter Inn, he shared his lodgings (and therefore his bed) with a South Sea islander called Queequeg who turned up very late because he was out selling shrunken heads, but who quickly became his greatest friend. Queequeg, who worshipped a little wooden god called Yojo that he carried in his sea-bag, was a man of premonitions, and on the whaling voyage had a coffin made for him by the ship's carpenter. This coffin, when every other soul was lost, saved Ishmael's life. When they reached Nantucket, Queequeg insisted, at the bidding of his little god, that Ishmael go alone to choose a ship for them to sail on. Since he knew nothing of the whaling business, this prospect filled Ishmael with foreboding. And rightly so, it would turn out…

Now, this plan of Queequeg's, or rather Yojo's, touching the selection of our craft; I did not like that plan at all. I had not a little relied upon Queequeg's sagacity to point out the whaler best fitted to carry us and our fortunes securely. But as all my remonstrances produced no effect, I was obliged to acquiesce. Next morning early, leaving Queequeg shut up with Yojo in our little bedroom, I sallied out among the shipping. After much prolonged sauntering and many random inquiries, I learnt that there were three ships up for three-years' voyages—The Devil-dam, the Tit-bit, and the Pequod. I peered and pryed about the Devil-dam; from her, hopped over to the Tit-bit; and, finally, going on board the Pequod, looked around her for a moment, and then decided that this was the very ship for us.

Strange way to make a choice indeed. Strange choice. They ended up as sailors on a godless ship, with a godless captain, embarking on a voyage of the damned. Ishmael's description of the ship is enough to make one's blood run cold…

