

MACMILLAN READERS

UPPER LEVEL

HERMAN MELVILLE

Moby Dick

Retold by John Escott



MACMILLAN

The Man Who Sold Heads

Call me Ishmael.

Some years ago, on a wet and miserable November day, I decided to get on a ship and sail to different parts of the world. There was nothing to interest me on shore and I was feeling irritable⁹ and bad-tempered. Whenever I feel like this, I know that it is time for me to go to sea again. Not as a passenger though. For that you need money, and I never have enough. Nor as a ship's captain, for I do not want to be responsible for other men. It is as much as I can do to be responsible for myself. When I go to sea, I go as an ordinary sailor.

So I packed my old bag and left Manhattan to go to New Bedford, where I would get a boat to the island of Nantucket. Why Nantucket? Because this time I was going to look for work on a whaling ship! It was my dream to hunt and catch a whale, that magnificent¹⁰ and mysterious creature of the sea. And all the biggest and best whaling ships sailed out of Nantucket Island, off the coast of Massachusetts.

I arrived in New Bedford on a Saturday night in December. I went straight to the docks but was disappointed to discover that the little boat for Nantucket had already sailed. There would not be another boat to the island until Monday.

I had very little money with me, for I had hoped to find a ship quickly. Now I had to find somewhere to eat and sleep, so I began to walk through the streets. Snow covered the ground and the ice-cold wind blew into my face. I passed several inns but they looked too expensive, so I went back down to the docks again. Here, in these dark and nearly empty streets, were the cheapest places to get a bed for the night.

After a time, a sign appeared over my head in the darkness. It hung outside an old wooden building.

*The Spouter Inn—Landlord, Peter Coffin*¹¹

The place looked suitable, so I pushed open the door and went inside. I stepped into a long, badly lit room with blackened walls. There were harpoons and spears fixed to the walls, and a large painting of a whale and whaling ships.

I found Peter Coffin, the landlord, and explained that I needed a room for two nights.

“Every room and every bed is occupied,” Coffin told me. “But you could share a bed with a harpooner. Are you going whaling?”

“Yes, I am,” I answered.

“Then you’d better get used to sharing a bed,” he said.

“All right,” I replied. I was tired, and it was too cold and dark to walk the streets in a strange town to look for another place to stay.

Soon after, the landlord brought me a supper of meat and potatoes and boiling hot tea. It was very good.

“Where’s the harpooner who will share my bed?” I asked him when I had finished eating.

“He’ll be here soon,” said Coffin. “He’s late tonight, but perhaps he can’t sell his head.”

“Sell his *head*?” I cried. “What are you talking about? I won’t sleep with a madman.”

“Be calm, be calm,” said Coffin. “This harpooner has just arrived from the South Seas. He bought a lot of embalmed¹² heads in New Zealand, and now he’s trying to sell them. So don’t worry.”

Then the landlord took me upstairs to the bedroom. It was small and cold, but the bed was big enough for four men to sleep in. There was a large seaman’s bag and a tall harpoon standing by the top of the bed. I guessed that both objects belonged to the man I was to share the bed with.

Peter Coffin put a candle on the table in the center of the room. Then he said goodnight and went back to the bar.

I was cold and tired, so I undressed, blew out the candle and got into bed. I was almost asleep when I heard a noise outside the room. I looked up and saw a light under the door.

“It must be the harpooner,” I thought. “The man who sells embalmed heads!”

I wanted to hide, or run from the room, but I could not move. My whole body was shaking with fear.

The stranger came into the room. He had a candle in one hand and the embalmed head in the other. Without looking towards the bed, he put the candle in a corner of the room on the floor and opened his bag. All I could see was his black shadow on the wall.

Then, after a moment, he lifted the candle and when I saw his face for the first time, I almost screamed! His skin was colored purple and yellow, with black lines and squares across it. At first I thought he had been fighting and had been badly cut, but then I remembered a story I had heard. It was about a whaleman who had been caught and tattooed¹³ all over his body by cannibals in the South Seas. Had it happened to this man too?

The stranger put a hand in his bag and pulled out a tomahawk, then he pulled his hat off his head. There was just a small circle of hair in the center of his bare head. A tomahawk and a wild haircut! What sort of man was this?

I watched, terrified, as he started to undress. I could see that the tattoos covered every part of his body. Then he lifted the tomahawk. I wanted to shout for help, but before I could open my mouth, he put the tomahawk into *his* mouth. Then he lifted the candle to one end of it and blew smoke from between his lips. He was using the tomahawk as a pipe¹⁴!

Then the man pulled out a strange little figure which was the size of a three-day-old baby. Remembering the embalmed head, I first thought it might be the body of a real child. But then I saw it was a small wooden figure.



*The stranger lifted the candle to one end,
and blew smoke from his lips.*

The man blew out the candle and jumped into the bed. At that moment I screamed—I could not help it.

“What the—!” the man shouted, and tried to catch hold of me.

“Landlord! Peter Coffin! Help me, help me!” I shouted.

“Who are you?” he growled at me. “Tell me, or I’ll kill you!”

Suddenly, the door burst open and the landlord ran in. I jumped out of the bed and ran across to him.

“Help me! Help me!” I cried.

“Don’t be afraid now,” Peter Coffin said, smiling. “Queequeg won’t hurt you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that I was to share a bed with a cannibal?” I shouted.

“I thought you knew it,” said Coffin. “I told you he was selling embalmed heads in the town.” He turned to the other man. “Queequeg, this man will sleep here tonight. Is that all right?”

Queequeg nodded calmly and pulled back the bedclothes.

“You get in first,” he said to me.

I looked at him. Although he was a cannibal, he seemed clean and respectable, a simple human being like myself.

“Goodnight,” said Peter Coffin, and he went out of the room.

I got into the bed again and blew out the candle—and never slept better in my life.

When I woke up the next morning, I found Queequeg’s arm round me. He was still asleep.

“Queequeg,” I said. He did not move.

I felt something scratch against my leg as I moved away from him. I pulled back the sheet and saw the tomahawk lying next to me. I was in bed with a tomahawk and a cannibal! Was the world going crazy?

“Queequeg!” I said again. “Wake up!”

At last he opened his eyes and sat up in the bed. He looked at me strangely for a moment, then he got out of bed and put on his clothes. When he was dressed, he put some soap on his face and shaved¹⁵—with his harpoon!