

CHAPTER 1

A Strange Roommate

Call me Ishmael. I am a schoolmaster, and whenever life got me down, I would leave my job and head for one special place. When my spirits needed restoring, I could always count on the sea.

I don't mean I'd travel as a passenger. No, for me the way to escape the closeness of my home town of Manhatto, New York, was to go to sea as a plain seaman. I liked the exercise, I liked getting paid instead of having to pay, plus I liked satisfying my yen for seeing faraway places.

This time, though, I decided that instead of signing up on a merchant vessel, I'd go on a whaling ship that would sail from that original home of whaling, Nantucket, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. I had to go to New Bedford first, then take a small boat to Nantucket.

I arrived in New Bedford on a bitter cold Saturday night in December, only to get some bad news. The last boat for Nantucket had just left, and there wouldn't be another until Monday morning. I hadn't counted on the extra expense of staying in New Bedford two nights, but I had no choice. So I began to look around for a low-cost inn.

Since the ones I passed seemed too cheerful and attractive for my pocket, I kept on walking in the icy wind. Finally, near the dock, I came to a run-down gabled house. Its sign creaked as it swung over the ramshackle door. Under a picture of a jet spray were the words

“The Spouter Inn—Peter Coffin.”

“Not very appealing,” I thought, “but better than being outdoors this frosty night.”

The first thing I saw as I entered the inn was a dismal picture of a sinking ship and a whale. One wall was hung with all kinds of frightening weapons—clubs, spears, whaling lances, and rusty harpoons. The entrance to the bar was formed by the arch of a whale’s open mouth, and the wrinkled bartender seemed to be mixing drinks inside the whale’s fierce jaws.

The landlord said that he was full up, but that if I wanted to stay, I would have to share a bed with a harpooner. I didn’t like the idea, but I knew that sharing rooms was a common practice in small-town inns. I told the landlord that if I had no choice, I might put up with half of a decent man’s blanket.

All through supper I watched for the harpooner to arrive, but he did not appear. I

dreaded the thought of sleeping in a strange bed in a strange town with a total stranger—especially a rough harpooner. I kept a worried eye on the door until midnight, but there was still no sign of him.

“Landlord,” I finally said, “where is he? And what sort of man is he, to keep such late hours?”

“Generally he’s the early bird what catches the worm,” explained the landlord. “But tonight he’s out a-peddlin. Must be havin’ trouble sellin’ his head.”

“His *what?*” I shouted.

“Be easy,” said the landlord. “This harpooner has just arrived from the South Seas with a lot of embalmed shrunken heads from New Zealand. Great curios, you know. He’s sold ‘em all but one, and I told him it wouldn’t do to be sellin’ human heads about the streets tomorrow, when folks is goin’ to church.”

“He sounds like a dangerous man,” I cried.

MOBY DICK

“He pays regular,” said the landlord, lighting a candle. “And that’s all that concerns me. Now come along and I’ll take you to your room.”

A crazy old sea-chest stood in the small cold room, and in the middle was a bed big enough for four harpooners. There was no other furniture but a rough shelf and an old wooden chair. A seaman’s bag sat on the floor, and a tall harpoon stood beside the bed.

I was restless for a while after the landlord left. At last, I slid off into a light doze.

Suddenly, a heavy footstep in the passageway awakened me, and I saw a gleam of light come into the room.

“Lord save me!” I thought. “It must be the head-peddler.”

I lay perfectly still, watching a shadowy figure cram the horrible New Zealand head into the sea-bag. He flipped his heavy sea-coat on the chair, reached into the bag, and

took out what looked like a tomahawk. I couldn't see the man's face for a while, but when I did, I froze.

The face was of a dark-purplish color, stuck all over with large blackish-looking squares. And when he pulled off his hat, I came close to crying out in surprise. There was no hair on his head—none but a small twisted scalp-knot, a hank of long hair that had been left in the center when the rest was shaved off. His bald purplish head looked for all the world like a mildewed skull.

Had the stranger not stood between me and the door, I would have bolted out of the room in a frightened rush. But I just lay there waiting, silently examining the rest of him.

His chest, arms, and back were checkered like his face, and his legs were so covered with tattoos, they resembled a parade of dark green frogs running up the trunks of young palm trees.

The stranger reached over to where he had thrown his heavy sea-coat, and from the pocket he took a little hunchbacked figure—a worshipping idol, a handful of wood shavings, a candle, and a bit of ship's biscuit. These he set on the fireplace. Then he lit a kind of sacrificial flame, burned the biscuit and seemed to make a polite offering of it to the little figure. His face twitched in an unnatural manner, and he made strange noises in his throat. He seemed to be worshipping this figure in some sort of ceremony. I could only watch in fascination.

CHAPTER 2

A Friend for Life

Finally the stranger put out the little fire and stuffed the tiny idol back in his coat pocket. I was thinking of speaking out, but before I could, he suddenly popped the tomahawk-shaped object between his teeth, brought a match up to it, and puffed out a huge cloud of tobacco smoke. Then he jumped into bed.

When I called out, he grunted in surprise. But I stammered and rolled toward the wall.

He began to shout and wave the tomahawk-pipe, spreading hot ashes all around. I was terrified he'd cut me or set the bed on fire.

“Who-ee debil you?” he yelled. “Speak-ee, or dam-me, I kill-ee!”

I shouted for the landlord who, thank Heaven, arrived quickly with a light in his hand.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, grinning from the open door. “Queequeg wouldn’t harm a hair of your head.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the harpooner was a cannibal?” I roared.

“I thought ye knowed. Didn’t I tell ye he was out peddlin’ heads?” He turned to Queequeg. “Look here. This man sleepee you—you sabbee?”

“Me sabbee,” Queequeg grunted, puffing away at his pipe. He politely turned the cover back and motioned for me to get into bed.

I took a good look at him and realized that under all that paint he was really a good, sober man. He probably had as much reason to be afraid of me as I had to fear him.

“Okay, landlord,” I said, “but tell him to put the tomahawk away and stop smoking in bed. I ain’t insured for fire.”

Queequeg readily agreed and rolled way over to one side, as if to say, “You’ve nothing to fear from me.”

“Good night, landlord,” I said. “You may go.”

The next morning, Queequeg courteously signaled that he would dress first and let me have the room to myself. My roommate was polite, while I was the rude one. I couldn’t help staring as he put on his tall beaver hat first, then got under the bed to put on his boots in privacy. After this, he crawled out to put on his pants and shirt.

Next he took a wet piece of soap and began to lather his face. I wondered what kind of razor he had and soon found out, much to my surprise. He slipped the harpoon head off its long pole, sharpened it on his boot, and

vigorously scraped away at his cheeks. I found this amazing at the time, but I would not find this so amazing later on, when I learned how sharp these fine steel harpoon-heads are kept.

At breakfast, I was expecting to hear exciting sea stories from all the experienced whalers, but they were silent, bashful bears. Queequeg kept pretty busy, though. He'd brought his harpoon along and, ignoring the hot rolls and coffee, reached the harpoon across the breakfast table to spear one beef-steak after another, all as rare as could be.

Later I found myself alone in the public room with him. I watched as he picked up a heavy book from the table and slowly counted the pages in his strange language. After every fifty pages, he'd stop and whistle in astonishment at how many pages there were. Then he'd go on counting.

I wondered to myself why he wasn't more friendly with the other seamen at the inn.

But on second thought, I liked him for it. Here was a man 20,000 miles away from his home in New Zealand, in a place as foreign to him as if he'd landed on the planet Jupiter.

Yet he managed to keep himself at ease, content with his own companionship. I felt myself drawn to him. So I pulled up my bench and tried my best to talk to him. He asked me if we'd be sharing a room again that night. When I said yes, he looked pleased, as if I'd complimented him by not arranging for a change.

I tried to explain a bit about the book he was holding—what printing was and what the pictures in it meant. When I suggested we smoke, he produced his tobacco pouch and tomahawk-pipe. We passed the pipe back and forth a few times.

When our smoke was over, he pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me around the waist, and said that we were "married"—

which in his country's language meant that we were now best friends and he would die for me if necessary. Here in America, of course, we don't trust people so quickly. Close friendships don't form so fast. I felt, though, that in the case of this innocent savage, the old rules just didn't apply.

In our room, after supper and another friendly smoke, he made me a present of his embalmed head. Then he took his tobacco pouch and, groping under the tobacco, took out some thirty dollars in silver. This he divided into two parts and insisted that half was mine. I tried to refuse, but he picked them up and forced them into my pocket.

Then he took out the little hunchbacked figure he had used in his ritual the previous night and made signs that he wanted me to join him in his ceremony. This posed a problem for me. As a good Christian, I knew worshipping idols was against my religion. But

then I got to thinking—could my great God, mighty ruler of all heaven and earth, be jealous of a little piece of wood? And doesn't God really want us all to do for our fellow men what we want them to do for us? So I lit the fire, offered the figure some burnt biscuit, and bowed once or twice. This done, I went to bed.

With both of us wide awake early in the morning, Queequeg began to talk about his background. "Queequeg born on Kokovoko—small-ee island in South Pacific," he explained. "Queequeg father King, and uncle High Priest of island. Queequeg be King when old father dies. But Queequeg have see Christian world first and bring back great improvements to his people.

"So when whaling ship land on Kokovoko, Queequeg beggee captain take him aboard. Captain say no, but Queequeg not give up. Paddle his canoe to narrow strait ship must enter, sink canoe, climb up side of ship, and

throw himself on deck. Again captain say no. But when he see chief's son ready to die, he let Queequeg stay on board. There, Queequeg learn-ee whaling."

"Do you plan to go back soon and take over your throne?" I asked.

"Queequeg watch-ee how sailors behave and learn-ee that even Christians be wicked," he said. "Now Queequeg feel he not fit carry on line of thirty pure kings before him. At least not till-ee some day, when Queequeg feel clean once more."

"What will you do now?" I asked.

"Queequeg sail again," he said firmly.

"I plan to sign on a whaling ship out of Nantucket," I told him.

"Den Queequeg go with friend and sign-ee on same ship."

I was glad for two reasons. Queequeg was my friend, and he was an experienced harpooner. As such, he would be a good teacher for me on my first whaling voyage.

CHAPTER 3

The Mysterious Captain Ahab

The next morning Queequeg and I borrowed a wheelbarrow and brought our things to the dock. He told me that the first time he had seen a wheelbarrow he didn't know what to do with it, so he fastened his sea-chest to it and carried the whole thing on his shoulders.

"Didn't people laugh?" I asked.

"All peoples laugh-ee at different ways," he replied. "I tell-ee you nother story. Sea captain him visiting Kokovoko Island... he be tell-ee come along wedding Queequeg sister. High Priest him take big bowl and dippee

fingers in for bless coconut juice before it-give-ee to guests. Captain not sabbee. Him wash-ee hands in juice.... What you tink now? Tink Queequeg people not laugh?"

"Yes, Queequeg," I said. "I suppose they did."

By now we had reached the *Moss*, a small ship sailing from New Bedford to Nantucket, and we went on board. Some of the passengers started to make fun of Queequeg. One in particular got him angry. Dropping his harpoon, Queequeg lifted the rude man and threw him in the air. As he was coming down, Queequeg gently tapped his back in the middle of his somersault, and the fellow landed on his feet. Queequeg then turned his back to him and lit his tomahawk-pipe.

The man complained to the captain, who came running. "What in thunder do you mean by that? You might have killed the chap!" he shouted.

“What him say?” asked Queequeg calmly.

“The captain say you near kill-ee that one there,” I said, pointing to the shivering man.

Queequeg’s face took on a look of contempt. “Kill-ee him?” he said. “Him small-ee fish. Queequeg no kill-ee small-ee fish; Queequeg kill-ee big whale!”

“I’ll kill-ee you, cannibal,” roared the captain, “if you try any tricks again. So watch out.”

But it was the captain’s turn to watch out. Something had gone wrong in raising the mainsail. The boom, or long low pole that keeps the sail stretched out, was now swinging from side to side, making huge sweeps of the deck. On one sweep, it brushed the rude character overboard, then continued to swing back and forth, looking like it would go on like that until it snapped. Everybody just stood frozen to the deck, not knowing what to do.

Everybody except for Queequeg. First he

dropped to his knees and crawled under the path of the boom to a rope. He tied one end of it to the bulwarks, or sides of the upper deck. The other end he flung out like a lasso and caught the boom as it went over his head. All was steady.

Then he stripped off his shirt and made a perfect dive into the freezing, foamy water. We couldn't see anyone but Queequeg swimming around. Suddenly he disappeared underwater and then surfaced, stroking with one arm and dragging a limp form with the other.

The rude man was saved, the captain apologized to Queequeg, and I made up my mind never to leave my best friend's side.

I had to part from him for a short while though, once the *Moss* reached Nantucket. Back in our room in New Bedford, Queequeg had insisted that the little idol he carried about—Yojo was its name—had given him a

message. It had said that I, alone, was to pick out the whaling ship for us to sign up with.

After checking out the ships ready for a three-year whaling trip, I chose the *Pequod*—a small, old-fashioned vessel. I told a sun-tanned, wrinkled gentleman I met on board that I wanted to sign up. He introduced himself as Captain Peleg, one of the two owners of the *Pequod*.

“What takes thee a-whaling?” asked Captain Peleg. “I want to know why before I think of shipping ye.”

“Well, sir, I want to see what whaling is,” I explained.

“Have ye ever clapped an eye on Captain Ahab?”

“Who’s Captain Ahab, sir?”

“He’s the captain of this ship. Why don’t ye take a good look at him before ye tie yourself up in whaling?... Ye’ll find him when ye see a man with only one leg.”

“Did he lose the other while whaling?” I asked.

“Did he lose it while whaling, ye ask? Young man, it was crunched off by the biggest sea monster that ever chipped a boat!”

The old captain’s story didn’t make me change my mind, and I finally convinced him I was determined to sign on. When I told him about Queequeg, he said to bring him along. Just as I was about to leave, I remembered I hadn’t met the ship’s captain.

“Where can I find Captain Ahab?” I asked.

“Why do ye want to see him? It’s enough that you’re shipped.”

“Yes, but I still would like to see him.”

“Well, don’t count on it,” said Captain Peleg. “He’s sick. . . . No, he isn’t exactly sick, but he’s not well, either. Anyhow, he won’t always see me, so I don’t think he’ll see ye. He’s kind of moody, but a good man, a good man. . . . Named after a king in the Bible, ye

know.”

“Yes, but wasn’t the biblical Ahab a wicked king who was killed?” I asked.

“Don’t ever say that on board the *Pequod*! Ahab didn’t choose his name. I know Captain Ahab. He may have lost his mind a little on his last trip home, but that was because of the pain in his leg stump. And remember, he’s got a young wife and a son. Don’t judge him by his wicked name.”

I left, puzzling over in my mind all that Captain Peleg had said about the mysterious Captain Ahab.