

CHAPTER 12

On the Trail of the White Whale

“Ship ahoy! Hast seen the White Whale?” The call came from Ahab to a passing ship flying an English flag.

The old man stood on deck with his trumpet to his mouth. Ahab's ivory leg was plainly revealed to the captain of the *Samuel Enderby*. This gentleman was a burly, sun-burned, fine-looking man about sixty years old. The empty right sleeve of his jacket streamed behind him.

“Hast seen the White Whale?” Ahab repeated.

“See this?” answered the captain, holding up the right sleeve of his jacket to reveal a white arm made of sperm whale bone. The arm ended in a wooden head like a hammer.

In less than a minute, Ahab’s boat was lowered for a visit to the other ship. As the old man climbed aboard, the *Enderby’s* captain advanced, extending his ivory arm in welcome. Ahab crossed it with his ivory leg, calling out, “Aye, aye. Let us shake bones together—an arm and a leg. Was it the White Whale took that arm off?”

“Aye,” said the captain. “We had lowered our small boat to hunt some four or five whales. We managed to get our boat fastened to one of them. Suddenly, up from the bottom of the sea came a bouncing great whale with a milky-white head and hump.”

“It was he! It was Moby Dick!” shouted Ahab.

“And he had harpoons sticking in near his

right side," added the captain.

"They were mine! They were my irons!" cried Ahab. "Go on, go on."

"He began snapping furiously at my line."

"Aye. He wanted to free himself. An old trick. I know him."

"The line caught in his teeth, and when we pulled the line, our boat slid to the top of his hump. He was the noblest and biggest whale I ever saw in all my life, so I resolved to capture him in spite of the rage he was in. I jumped into my mate's boat, grabbed the nearest harpoon, and let the old whale have it."

Ahab was listening eagerly.

"Next thing I knew, I couldn't see anything for the black foam, as his tail stuck up right out of the water like a marble steeple. Suddenly, down comes the tail, cutting my boat in two, and then he backs away through the wreck."

"What happened next?" cried Ahab.

“I seized hold of my harpoon pole that was sticking in him. For a moment I clung to that. But the sea dashed me off, and the fish went down like a flash. It was then that the point of that second cursed iron towing along near me caught me here at my shoulder and carried me down—to Hell’s flames, I thought for sure.”

Ahab stared at the point just below the captain’s shoulder where his arm ended.

“All of a sudden, thank the good God, the point tore its way along the flesh down the whole length of my arm. It came out at my wrist, and up I floated.”

The ship’s doctor who had joined us finished the story. “Aye. A two-foot wound it was. Then it grew worse, and I had to amputate the arm. “

“What became of the White Whale?” asked Ahab, for that was all that interested him.

“We saw him two more times,” answered the captain.

“Couldn’t you fasten onto him again?”

“Didn’t want to try to. Ain’t losing one limb enough?”

The English captain glanced at Ahab’s ivory limb. “Don’t *you* agree that it’s best to leave that whale alone?” he asked.

“Maybe so,” said Ahab firmly. “But I’m still going after him. Which way was he heading?”

“He was heading east, I think....” Then turning to Fedallah, the captain whispered, “Good God, is Captain Ahab crazy?”

But Fedallah, putting a finger on his lip, slid over the *Samuel Enderby*’s bulwarks to take our boat’s oar. Soon Ahab was standing in the small boat, with his men springing to their oars. The other captain tried to call out to him, but in vain. With his back to the *Enderby*, Ahab stood like a statue until he was alongside the *Pequod*.

CHAPTER 13

Returned to Life

We were carrying a precious cargo by this time—numerous barrels of whale oil which were stored below deck in the hold. In order to protect them, our men hosed them down twice a week with sea water. This had two purposes. First, the water kept the wooden barrels tightly sealed. Second, as the sailors checked the water that was pumped off, they could see if there was any oil mixed with it. In that way, they could detect any serious leakage from the barrels.

The morning after we met the *Enderby*, as

our sailors were pumping the water off the barrels, they discovered much oil rising and mixing with the water. Starbuck rushed down to Ahab's cabin to report it.

"The oil in the hold is leaking, sir. We've got to remove the casks and see where the leak is."

Ahab, who had been studying his charts, whirled around in anger. "We're too close to Japan," he snapped. "Can't waste time tinkering with a pack of old barrels."

"But, sir," argued Starbuck, "we'll be wasting more oil in a day than we can replace in a year. What we've come twenty thousand miles to get is worth saving."

"You're right about that," said Ahab, "*if we get what we've come for.*"

"I'm talking about the oil in the hold, sir," said Starbuck calmly.

"And I'm not!" shouted Ahab. "Let it leak. Begone now, Starbuck!"

"But, sir, what will the owners say?"

“Let them stand on Nantucket beach and outyell the storms. Ahab doesn’t care. The only real owner of anything is its commander. And Ahab is the Pequod’s commander. Now up on deck!”

“But, Captain. . . .” pleaded Starbuck.

Ahab grabbed a loaded gun from the rack and pointed it at his Chief Mate. “There is one God that is lord over this earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod. Get on deck! “

Starbuck, eyes flashing and cheeks on fire, managed to calm himself. As he left the cabin, he turned and said, “You have outraged me, not insulted me, so I’m not going to warn you to beware of Starbuck. You would only laugh at that. But, sir, let Ahab beware of Ahab—you are your own worst enemy!”

After Starbuck had gone, Ahab thoughtfully repeated what he had heard. “‘Let Ahab beware of Ahab’—there’s something there.”

It would be hard to guess why Ahab finally decided to listen to Starbuck. It could have been a flash of honesty or the thought that it was safer to keep as much good feeling as possible between himself and his chief officer. Anyway, he did order the barrels of whale oil raised and inspected.

While working in the damp, slimy hold at hoisting out the huge barrels of oil, poor Queequeg caught a chill and a terrible fever. Thin and pale, he lay in his hammock wasting away, till there seemed little left of him but his frame and his tattooing. He was on the very edge of the door of death.

One day, Queequeg asked a strange favor. He said that in Nantucket, he had seen certain little dark wood canoes with lids, like on his native isle. He had been told that all whalers who died in Nantucket were buried in those dark canoes. This idea pleased him. It was like his own people's custom of placing a dead

warrior in his canoe and letting him float away into the starry island of the sky.

When the ship's carpenter was told of this wish, he went straight to Queequeg and measured him very carefully. Using dark lumber cut from island trees on a previous trip and stored on the *Pequod*, he set to work on the coffin-canoe.

When it was finished, Queequeg called for his harpoon and had the iron placed in the coffin, together with one of his boat paddles. In addition, he requested a flask of fresh water, a bag of woody earth, and a piece of sailcloth rolled up for a pillow. When it was all set up, he had himself lifted into his final bed for a tryout. He lay there with his arms crossed and the little god Yojo on his breast. Then he gave the signal to be returned to his hammock.

But having made all these preparations for death and having found the coffin a good fit,

Queequeg suddenly got better, as if he'd changed his mind about dying.

Now he used his coffin for a sea-chest, emptying into it his canvas bag of clothes. He spent many spare hours carving on the lid all kinds of strange figures and drawings, mostly copied from the twisted tattooing on his body. These tattoos had been done by a prophet who had worked out the complete explanation of heaven and earth. So Queequeg was a kind of walking riddle—a mystery story in one volume.

CHAPTER 14

Strange Predictions

The *Pequod* had on board an old blacksmith named Perth, and it was to him Ahab went to see about a special job. The captain brought the blacksmith a pouch of nailstubs from the shoes of racing horses and asked to have them melted down and made into an especially strong harpoon.

When Perth was about to give the sharp barb, or point, its final heating, he asked Ahab to bring the water cask to him. The cold water would temper, or harden, the barb. But Ahab had a different idea.

“No, I will not use water for that,” said Ahab. “I want that harpoon point to be a true death weapon. It must be tempered in blood!” Then turning to the three Indians, he asked, “Tashtego, Queequeg, Daggoo, will ye give me as much blood as is needed to cover this point?”

The three men agreed, and three punctures were made in their skin. Soon the barb of the White Whale’s harpoon was tempered... in human blood!

Later that night, Ahab awoke from a nightmare. He went up on deck where Fedallah was keeping watch and told him about his dream. In it, he saw himself in a hearse, a carriage for the dead.

Fedallah peered at him in the lantern’s flickering glare. “I have told you my visions about the way you will die. Don’t you remember? I said you will have neither a hearse nor a coffin.”

“Yet I do worry,” said Ahab. “People who die at sea do not have hearses.”

“Aye, but did I not also say that before you could die on this trip, you would have to see two hearses on the sea?” Fedallah reminded him. “The first would not be made by human hands, and the second would be made of wood grown in America.”

“That *would* be a strange sight on the ocean,” said Ahab. “But what was that other saying about yourself?”

“That I would go before you, to pilot you into the other world.”

“And that after you die, Fedallah, you would again appear to me, to pilot me, right? Then I guess that means that I *will* be able to kill Moby Dick and live to tell the story.”

“Here is another promise, old man,” said the Indian mysteriously. “Only a *rope* can kill you.”

“You must mean by hanging. But that can

never be." Ahab laughed mockingly. "Therefore, I am to live forever."

As we neared the equator—for it was there that Ahab hoped to find Moby Dick, we heard unearthly cries, like the wailing of ghosts. These cries were coming from the rocky islands past which we were sailing. The civilized part of the crew said it was mermaids, and the men shuddered. The pagan harpooners just kept calm. But the oldest sailor of all, who was from the Isle of Man, off the coast of England, had a different opinion. According to this old Manxman, we were hearing the voices of newly drowned men at sea.

Later on, when Flask told Ahab about the eerie sounds, the old man laughed. "I know all about those islands," he said. "It was just the cries of mother seals who have lost their cubs or the cries of cubs who have lost their mothers."

This explanation only made the crew feel

worse. Most sailors are superstitious about seals. This is true not only because the animals' troubled tones sound human, but also because their round heads and half-intelligent faces resemble the heads and faces of humans. As a result, this was taken to be an evil omen, and the men fully expected something bad to happen.

Sure enough, the worst did happen—to a sailor who had climbed the mainmast to watch for the White Whale. Half-asleep, he had tumbled down into the sea. Immediately, the wooden life buoy was thrown overboard for him to cling to. But it had been in the sun too long and had dried out and shrunk. Water got into the wooden buoy, and the added weight of the water pulled it down, along with the poor sailor.

Now the men felt that the bad omen of the seals' cries has been fulfilled. But the old Manxman disagreed—that omen was not

fulfilled yet.

We needed to replace the buoy for future use, but we had trouble finding a light-enough cask from which to make it. Queequeg pointed to his coffin, offering its fine, hard wood as a replacement. The idea seemed strange to the officers at first, but finally they told the carpenter to nail the lid on tightly and seal the seams to make them waterproof. The *Pequod's* life buoy now would be a coffin.

The next day, a large ship, the *Rachel*, came bearing down upon us, all her beams thickly clustered with men.

“Have ye seen the White Whale?” came Ahab’s voice.

“Aye, yesterday. Have ye seen a whaleboat adrift?” came a voice from the *Rachel*.

In his joy that Moby Dick had been seen, Ahab didn’t bother to reply and was interested only in boarding the *Rachel* to get more information. But her captain quickly got to

our ship instead.

The captain of the *Rachel* answered Ahab's eager questions with an account of what had happened.

"Four of our boats went after the white hump of that whale, and the fastest one of them seemed to have fastened to him. Suddenly, both boat and whale disappeared, and we all figured that the wounded whale was running with his hunters. But though we searched all through the night, not the least glimpse of the missing boat was seen."

Ahab seemed disappointed, but the captain went on. "I've come on board to ask you to join us in the rescue search. We can sweep the area in parallel lines to search for my missing men, and...." He hesitated a moment, then went on. "You see, my own son is among them."

Here, the *Rachel's* captain noted Ahab's cold expression. "For God's sake, man, I am

begging you," he cried. "Let me hire your ship, then. I'll gladly pay."

"We must save the boy!" cried Stubb.

I was sure Stubb spoke for all of us on board, and the cries of approval from the men bore this out.

At that moment, the old Manxman raised his hand to silence everyone. "The boy drowned with the rest of them last night," he said. "Didn't we hear their spirits?"

Ahab ignored him, but turned to the captain and spoke calmly and coldly. "I will not do it. We are losing time right now. Good-bye and God bless ye, man."

The captain of the *Rachel* stood stunned for a moment.

Then Ahab turned to his First Mate and called, "Mr. Starbuck, in three minutes' time have all these strangers off and let the ship sail as before."