

## HUMOR



Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

from *Moby-Dick* (1851)

...The next moment the light was extinguished, and this wild cannibal, tomahawk between his teeth, sprang into bed with me. I sang out, I could not help it now; and giving a sudden grunt of astonishment he began feeling me. Stammering out something, I knew not what, I rolled away from him against the wall, and then conjured him, whoever or whatever he might be, to keep quiet, and let me get up and light the lamp again.

But his guttural responses satisfied me at once that he but ill comprehended my meaning. “Who-e debel you?”--he at last said—“you no speak-e, dam-me, I kill-e.” And so saying the lighted tomahawk began flourishing about me in the dark.

“Landlord, for God’s sake, Peter Coffin!” shouted I. “Landlord! Watch! Coffin! Angels! Save me!”

“Speak-e! tell-ee me who-ee be, or dam-me, I kill-e!” again growled the cannibal, while his horrid flourishings of the tomahawk scattered the hot tobacco ashes about me till I thought my linen would get on fire. But thank heaven, at that moment the landlord came into the room light in hand, and leaping from the bed I ran to him.

“Don’t be afraid now,” said he, grinning again. “Queequeg here wouldn’t harm a hair of your head.”

“Stop your grinning,” shouted I, “and why didn’t you tell me that that infernal harpooner was a cannibal?”

“I thought ye know’d it; didn’t I tell ye, he was a peddlin’ heads around town?--but turn flukes again and go to sleep. Queequeg, look here--you sabbee me, I sabbee you--this man sleepe you--you sabbee?”--

“Me sabbee plenty”--grunted Queequeg, puffing away at his pipe and sitting up in bed.

“You gettee in,” he added, motioning to me with his tomahawk, and throwing the clothes to one side. He really did this in not only a civil but a really kind and charitable way. I stood looking at him a moment. For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal. What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself--the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.

“Landlord,” said I, “tell him to stash his tomahawk there, or pipe, or whatever you call it; tell him to stop smoking, in short, and I will turn in with him. But I don’t fancy having a man smoking in bed with me. It’s dangerous. Besides, I ain’t insured.”

This being told to Queequeg, he at once complied, and again politely motioned me to get into bed--rolling over to one side as much as to say-- I won’t touch a leg of ye.

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

I turned in, and never slept better in my life....

He commenced dressing at top by donning his beaver hat, a very tall one, by the by, and then--still minus his trousers--he hunted up his boots. What under the heavens he did it for, I cannot tell, but his next movement was to crush himself--boots in hand, and hat on--under the bed; when, from sundry violent gaspings and strainings, I inferred he was hard at work booting himself; though by no law of propriety that I ever heard of, is any man required to be private when putting on his boots. But Queequeg, do you see, was a creature in the transition state--neither caterpillar nor butterfly. He was just enough civilized to show off his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner. His education was not yet completed. He was an undergraduate. If he had not been a small degree civilized, he very probably would not have troubled himself with boots at all; but then, if he had not been still a savage, he never would have dreamt of getting under the bed to put them on. At last, he emerged with his hat very much dented and crushed down over his eyes, and began creaking and limping about the room, as if, not being much accustomed to boots, his pair of damp, wrinkled cowhide ones--probably not made to order either--rather pinched and tormented him at the first go off of a bitter cold morning.

Seeing, now, that there were no curtains to the window, and that the street being very narrow, the house opposite more and more commanded a plain view into the room, and observing more and more the indecorous figure that Queequeg made, staving about with little else but his hat and boots on; I begged him as well as I could, to accelerate his toilet somewhat, and particularly to get into his pantaloons as soon as possible....

Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away... He was actuated by a profound desire to learn among the Christians, the arts whereby to make his people still happier than they were; and more than that, still better than they were. But, alas! the practices of whalers soon convinced him that even Christians could be both miserable and wicked; infinitely more so, than all his father’s heathens. Arrived at last in old Sag Harbor; and seeing what the sailors did there; and then going on to Nantucket, and seeing how they spent their wages in that place also, poor Queequeg gave it up for lost. Thought he, it’s a wicked world in all meridians; I’ll die a pagan.

And thus an old idolator at heart, he yet lived among these Christians, wore their clothes, and tried to talk their gibberish. Hence the queer ways about him, though now some time from home.

By hints, I asked him whether he did not propose going back, and having a coronation; since he might now consider his father dead and gone, he being very old and feeble at the last accounts. He answered no, not yet; and added that he was fearful Christianity, or rather Christians, had unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him.