

Romantic Stories of Books

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SECOND SERIES

IV.

Moby Dick

SOME twenty-two hundred years have elapsed since the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, probably the most combustible of the seven wonders of the world, was set on fire by a young man in search of immortality. He had his wish, after a fashion, and is forever embalmed in Bartlett, where anyone wishing to lend encouragement to his reprehensible method of acquiring posthumous fame may seek him out. His name will not be mentioned in the present paper.

Neither will that of a plumber who was working in the camphene room of Harper & Brothers' printing and publishing establishment on Pearl Street, New York, on December 10, 1853. Camphene (better known to a later day as oil of turpentine) was employed to wash the ink off the rollers of the printing press, and as a precaution against fire the Harpers confined its use to a small zinc-lined chamber. The plumber lit a match—to light his lamp, J. Henry Harper charitably explained in "The House of Harper" (1912); "for the purpose of lighting his cigar or pipe," declared the *New York Tribune* of December 12, 1853, which further asserted that the plumber used a lighted piece of paper and not a match. But whatever he used and whatever he used it for, both accounts agree that he tossed the brand into a pan of presumed water. The presumption was false; the pan was full of camphene and the plumber left, not to realize until some hours later, if at all, that he had started one of the half-dozen most disastrous fires in the history of New York.

As a sheer spectacle the fire left nothing to be desired. "In all the conflagrations that we have witnessed—and their name is legion—we have never seen anything to equal this in grandeur," wrote

the *Tribune* reporter, who soared to heights of utter lyricism in his three-column account of the episode in a day when only one of Mr. Pierce's messages to Congress could reasonably command so much space. The *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer* whose eleven-column page was a little larger than two average size newspapers pages of today, printed a more concentrated account and depended on italics and small caps to bring home the enormity of the offender's carelessness: "The plumber, after lighting a paper, *threw it, as he supposed, into a pan of water, but it proved to be a can of CAMPHENE.*" The following day (Tuesday, December 13th), the *Courier* announced: "The plumber who was the cause of the destructive fire, did not return to his employer's place of business on Saturday, nor has his whereabouts been heard of." And thus anonymously does he vanished into history.

The mischief he accomplished, had it been deliberate, must have exceeded his wildest anticipations. The camphene first roared into flames about one o'clock in the afternoon; by five o'clock, according to J. Henry Harper, "sixteen large buildings had been destroyed, embracing property estimated as worth over a million and a half of dollars. Of this loss nearly, if not quite, a million was borne by Harper & Brothers, their entire insurance amounting to less than two hundred thousand dollars. This was said to have been the largest fire loss sustained up to that time by a commercial house."

As a catastrophic invasion of the precinct of letters the Harper fire has probably been exceeded only by the great fire of London in 1666, in its sweep through St. Paul's Churchyard. The entire January issue of

Harper's Magazine, which publication had been initiated three and a half years before, was destroyed—not a sheet, plate, woodcut, proof, or line of copy was saved. Some authors, even in those pre-carbon-paper days, made duplicate sets of their copy or retained proofs. But consider the plight of Professor Henry Drisler of Columbia, whose new edition of Yonge's English-Greek Lexicon vanished lock, stock and barrel, alpha to omega. Eighteen years would pass before the professor had a fresh batch of copy ready. During the two years preceding the fire, however, the Harpers had disposed of twenty-five thousand copies of his version of the famous Liddell and Scott Lexicon (the original "Alice of Wonderland," it will be recalled, was one of Dr. Liddell's three daughters.)

Professor Drisler was patiently of much vaster importance to the Harpers than was Herman Melville, who, as one of the minor sufferers from the nameless plumber's carelessness, must have read the news accounts of the fire with some approach to equanimity. Of seven books of his then in the Harpers' hands, from 185 to 494 copies of each were destroyed—and the plates of all seven. Among these, according to the carefully assembled data presented in Raymond M. Weaver's "Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic" (1921), were 297 copies of Mr. Melville's "Moby-Dick."

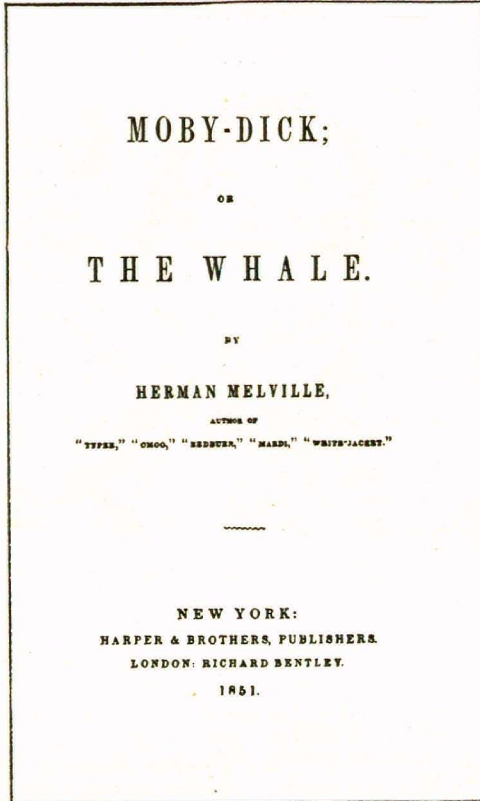
Melville was thirty-four at the time of the fire, but his literary career was already virtually complete, although more

years than he had yet lived were to accrue to him. He was that rare creature, a native of New York, where he was born in the summer of 1819, a few weeks after Walt Whitman had sent up his prima barbaric yawp out on Long Island.

Before Herman was five years old the family moved from his birthplace on Park Street to "a new brick 2 story house replete with conveniences," as his father described it, to be had at a rental of three hundred dollars a year. But it was far uptown, or rather out of town, on Bleeker Street, which thoroughfare a generation later would become the original metropolitan lodgment of practically all of Horatio Alger, Jr's heroes, and it was selected as "almost uniting the advantages of town and country," the father at the same time transferring his importing establishment to a new location on Pearl Street—the identical Pearl Street,

later the scene of the disastrous Harper fire.

When Herman was eleven the family moved to Albany, where his father died two years later, leaving a widow, eight children, and not much else. Herman had some schooling, clerked in a bank and in his brother's hat shop, helped his Uncle Thomas run his farm in Pittsfield, fifty miles up in the Berkshires, and in 1837, when he was not quite eighteen, went to sea. Whether, in all technical strictness, he actually ran away to sea is still somewhat debatable. But it amounted to that, and as it is much more romantic to assume that he did, and the assumption is not disprovable, let it stand so.



Title-page of the first edition

He went to New York, shipped aboard the *Highlander*, and sailed early in June for Liverpool. The voyage took a month. There were six weeks in Liverpool, then the return trip, and in the fall of 1837 Melville stretched his sea legs on Broadway. He did not re-ship—instead he went prosaically to teaching school, for three years off and on in the neighborhood of Albany. But in 1843 anticlimax yielded to climax when, on January 3rd, Herman Melville sailed out of the port of New Bedford on board the whaler *Acushnet*, 359 tons, Captain Pease commanding.

The *Acushnet* dropped anchor in Buzzard's Bay again four years and four months later with a profitable cargo of sperm oil, whale oil and whale-bone. But Seaman Melville was not among those present. With Richard Tobias Greene (the "Toby" of "Typee") he had abandoned ship when the *Acushnet* put in at the Marquesas, in Polynesia, in the summer of 1842.

The story of the remarkable events that followed can hardly be set forth here. It is available in ample summary in Mr. Weaver's biography, in necessarily more compact form in the late John Freeman's study of Melville in the English Men of Letters series, and *in extenso* in Melville's own "Typee," "Omoo," "White Jacket," and, to a less extent, "Mardi," just as the details of his earlier and less romantic argosy may be gleaned from "Redburn." He was home again in 1844, well ahead of the *Acushnet*. He rejoined his mother at Lansingburg, near Albany, and must have taken pen in hand almost as soon as hat went out of it. Before the winter of 1845 the manuscript of "Typee" was ready.

"Typee" was first published in England

—the circumstances are readily explained. Herman's older brother Gansevoort, setting out for London to be secretary to the American Legation, took "Typee" with him and had little difficulty in placing it with wise John Murray, who, once con-

vinced it was a veracious narrative, bought the right to print a thousand copies for a hundred pounds. Mr. Weaver's thorough researches brought to light no proof that "Typee" had previously been offered to an American publisher. Murray issued the book as "Narrative of a Four Months' Residence Among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands." The American edition of the same year (1846) was brought out by Wiley & Putnam as Numbers XIII and XIV of their Library of American Books, in



Herman Melville: from Lewis Mumford's book "Herman Melville," Harcourt, Brace.

which Poe and Hawthorne were already represented. A year later came "Omoo," published by the Harpers in New York and by Murray in London, and in 1849 "Mardi," published by the Harpers and Bentley. The same houses sponsored "Redburn" in 1849 and "White Jacket" in 1850.

Obviously Melville had put in a busy six years after his return to home soil. He had found time, too, for other activities than authorship. "Typee" had carried a dedication to Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of Massachusetts, an old family friend; in the summer of 1847 Melville married the Justice's daughter Elizabeth. Soon afterward they went to New York to live. In the fall of 1849 Melville went to England on publishing business—his first ocean voyage as a passenger—and after attending to his affairs and making a first and hurried trip to the continent was back in New York in February of 1850. In

the summer of that year Melville boarded in Pittsfield, and in October he bought a farm there—Arrowhead.

A few months earlier Nathaniel Hawthorne, in the elation that followed the success of "The Scarlet Letter," had come to live in Lenox, a few miles south. Hawthorne's literary career, if one includes the unclaimed "Fanshawe," dated back twenty-two years, Melville's a fourth of that—but Hawthorne was fifteen years older than Melville. They met under odd but pleasant circumstances. They were on a picnic—possibly a junket of Berkshire literateurs—when a thunder shower forced them into each other's company for two hours in the shelter of a protecting rock. The acquaintance thus fortuitously begun ripened quickly—how quickly may be gauged in some measure from the fact that when, barely a year later, "Moby-Dick" appeared, it carried this dedication: "In token of my admiration for his genius, this book is inscribed to Nathaniel Hawthorne."

"Moby-Dick," greatest of sea stories, was written seventy-five miles from salt water and a third of a mile above sea-level. Its composition required but a few months; Melville, as may be guessed from the census of his earlier productions given above, obviously wrote at white heat and top speed. The fact is all the more marvelous when one considers the matter of "Moby-Dick" itself. It is more than an epic of whaling; it is a veritable Bible of whaling. It is not alone a chronicle of personal experiences distilled into allegory, but a monument of erudition. Much remains to be written of Melville, and not the least interesting product of such research will be a bibliography of the authorities cited and quoted in "Moby-Dick."

The book appeared in the fall of 1851—in a single thick volume in New York, in three volumes in London (as "The Whale"). The New York price was \$1.50; in London thirty-one shillings and sixpence—rather more than twice as much. Meade Minnegerode's bibliography of Melville says the American edition was subsequent to the English. So be it. But in the collector's eye the first plump Harper edition is properly the more desirable—desirable at least to the point where one New York bookseller priced a copy a few

weeks ago at \$1,500, a figure that seems ridiculous in comparison with the value of Moby-Dick five years ago, and may seem ridiculous after another fashion five years hence.

"Moby-Dick" was not a success. None of Melville's earlier productions had set him on the road to affluence—"Typee" seems to have done better than any of the others, and "Moby-Dick" apparently worse than any that had intervened. It is quite likely that the Harper fire of 1853 mercifully saved it from being remaindered—and "Moby-Dick" was more than two years old when the fire occurred. Somehow, according to Mr. Weaver, although 297 copies fell a prey to the plumber's supposititious craving for tobacco, some sixty copies were rescued. The Harpers, inspecting their stockroom in the years that followed, must have glanced mournfully at the slowly-dwindling pile of "Moby-Dicks" and asked why the fire gods could not have spared some more electric seller. For according to Mr. Minnegerode "Moby-Dick" was not reprinted until 1863, at which rate the surviving copies of the first edition must have been parcelled out at an average of six a year, at which rate there is little percentage in bookselling. The 1863 reprint must have been an utter collapse, for "Moby-Dick" was not again reissued until 1892, the year after Melville's death. There was no edition in England following the original appearance of "The Whale" until 1901.

The Melville renaissance did not come until after the World War, and it is only in the interval since the Armistice that "Moby-Dick" has come into its own in the eye of reader and collector alike. Some of the réclame that has come to "Moby-Dick" is due to the now pretty general realization of the fact that with the possible exception of piracy, (which thank Heaven was practised largely by foreigners), whaling in the view of everyone but whalers, is the most romantic calling in which an American has ever participated. But a more specific reason is the growing bulk of Melville biographical and critical studies, as evidenced by Mr. Weaver's and Mr. Freeman's studies and the more recent interpretation of Melville by Lewis Mumford. Immortality, like whaling, is a tedious business.