

HERMAN MELVILLE

1819 – 1891

Herman Melville is widely acknowledged to be one of America's most significant literary figures, a formidable writer of the sea, and a strong voice for the quintessentially American ideals of democracy, freedom, and equality; he was also fierce in condemning the forces that impeded the fulfillment of those ideals. Though Melville died in relative obscurity, his novels and short fiction have become enduringly popular and highly acclaimed for their narrative power, philosophical depth, thematic richness, and stylistic innovation. One biographer wrote of *Moby-Dick* (1851) that it is “the most daring and prolonged aesthetic adventure that had ever been conducted in the hemisphere in the English language.” A persistent and eloquent defender of those who suffer within hierarchical, patriarchal, and racist power structures, Melville wrote about the lives of sailors, enslaved people, office clerks, and factory workers, defying dominant ideologies of masculinity, capitalism, “whiteness,” and colonialism.



Herman Melville was born in 1819 to Allan Melvill and Maria Gansevoort Melvill (the “e” was added later). He was descended on both sides from prominent families: his paternal grandfather played a part in the Boston Tea Party, and his maternal grandfather, General Peter Gansevoort, was a Revolutionary War hero. The Melvill children were raised in Maria's Dutch Reformed Calvinist faith, with its emphasis on original sin, damnation, and predestination; while Melville came to reject this interpretation of Christianity, it had a profound effect on his imagination. Melville began his education in New York City, but when Allan Melvill's importing business failed, the family moved to Albany, where Herman was enrolled at Albany Academy. He was educated there only for a year, before he was withdrawn for financial reasons. When Herman was twelve, his father died after descending into madness, leaving the family in debt, and in 1832 the twelve-year-old Herman began work as a clerk in the New York State Bank. It was at this time that Maria added the “e” to the family name, perhaps in an effort to distance themselves from Allan Melvill's bankruptcy.

Over the next five years, Melville worked at his brother Gansevoort's fur store and attended the Albany Academy again. In 1837, he took up a teaching post near Pittsfield, and in 1838 enrolled at the Lansingburgh Academy to study engineering, but in the following year he changed course dramatically by signing up as a cabin boy on the merchant ship *St. Lawrence*, which sailed from New York to Liverpool and back. On his return, Melville took up teaching, first in Greenbush and then in Brunswick, New York. In 1840 he decided to go to sea again, this time aboard a whaling ship, the *Acushnet*, which sailed from New Bedford to the South Seas on 3 January 1841. After sailing for over a year, Melville jumped ship on 9 July 1842 with his friend Richard Tobias Greene at the Marquesas Islands, where he lived with the islanders of the Taipi Valley for four weeks before joining an Australian whaling crew aboard the *Lucy Ann*. He shortly afterwards went to shore in Tahiti, where he was imprisoned as a mutineer; after escaping in October 1842, he signed on with a Nantucket whaling ship, the *Charles and Henry*. Upon completing the cruise in 1843, Melville spent time in the Hawaiian Islands, where he worked various jobs, including as a pin setter in a bowling alley. Later that year, Melville enlisted in the United States Navy and sailed on a frigate, the *United States*, until 1844, when he landed in Boston and was discharged.

In 1846, Melville published *Typee*, an account of his time among the Marquesas islanders; the book was first printed in London and then in New York. This travel narrative, and its sequel, *Omoo*, which recounts Melville's adventures in Tahiti, were very popular in America and Britain, establishing the young Melville as a literary celebrity known for sultry, action-packed adventure stories. While successes,

Typee and *Omoo* were also controversial: in both books, Melville attacked the Christian missionaries who sought to “civilize” the Indigenous peoples of the islands. While Melville’s depiction of the islanders partook of the racial stereotypes of his day, he asserted very clearly that the barbarism of white people far exceeded any that could be found among the islanders: “the fiend-like skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing engines, the vindictiveness with which we carry on our wars, and the misery and desolation that follow in their train, are enough of themselves to distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth.” Such statements proved provocative enough that the publishers of *Typee* chose to soften the book’s comments on missionaries in the second printing.

Typee was dedicated to Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court and father of Elizabeth Shaw, whom Melville married in 1847; the couple would in time have four children. Melville and Elizabeth settled first in New York City, and most of Melville’s family moved in with them: his mother Maria, his four sisters, and his brother and sister-in-law. Melville’s early fame brought him into the literary circle of the Duyckinck brothers in New York, from whose libraries Melville borrowed many books. He entered on a course of intense reading, which in turn exerted a profound influence over his future writing; in addition to the Old Testament prophets, he read Shakespeare with increasing wonderment, as well as Defoe, Milton, Rabelais, Swift, Mary Shelley, Byron, Montaigne, and Sir Thomas Browne.

In 1849, Melville turned from writing semi-autobiographical travel narratives to more inventive forms of fiction, as he felt an “invincible distaste” for facts and “a longing to plume my pinions for flight.” Looking to engage a more sophisticated audience in addition to the “superficial skimmer of pages” whom he believed had enjoyed his earlier works, Melville’s first fully fictional novel, *Mardi* (1849), shifted away from the realist mode to engage in a philosophical allegory that emphasizes the supreme importance of freedom and equality. The book sold poorly and was rejected by critics, and Melville responded by writing two more books in quick succession: *Redburn* in 1849 and *White-Jacket* in 1850. In a letter to his father-in-law, Melville wrote of these books that “they are two jobs, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood.” These two novels, which were in many ways a return to his earlier style, found a wide readership. After members of Congress read Melville’s scathing denunciation of flogging in *White-Jacket*, as well as his depiction of the authoritarian, unequal conditions of naval life, they banned flogging on all American ships. *Redburn*, which delves into themes of sexuality, nationalism, and the place of refugees in antebellum society, has been receiving increased critical attention, with one scholar deeming it “one of the great nineteenth-century works about race and emigration.”

In September 1850, Melville and his growing family moved out of New York City to Arrowhead, a farm in Pittsville, Massachusetts, which Melville bought with money borrowed from his father-in-law. While in the area earlier in the summer, Melville had met Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the two quickly became friends. In late August 1850, Melville published “Hawthorne and His Mosses” in the *Literary World* magazine, in which he praises Hawthorne’s genius, as well as his originality, darkness, and Americanness: “the smell of your beeches and hemlocks is upon him; your own prairies are in his soul . . . you will hear the far roar of his Niagara.” Viewed as an early expression of the Young America movement, the essay argues for the excellence and potential of American writers, with Hawthorne as an exemplary figure “who breathe[s] that unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things.”

Melville’s friendship with Hawthorne, and Hawthorne’s literary influence on Melville, came at a time of great creativity—he was in the process of writing *Moby-Dick*. His passionate letters to Hawthorne, as well as the frequent expression of homoerotic desire in his work, have led many to suppose the friendship between the two writers was a romantic one. If so, evidence for it is one-sided: while Melville was clearly passionately attached to Hawthorne, and while Hawthorne very much admired Melville and his work, only one letter from Hawthorne to Melville exists, and it is a request for Melville to pick up some mail. Though there is no clear biographical proof that Melville had sexual relationships with men, his work certainly celebrates homoerotic desire, linking it with, among other things, creativity and resistance to conventional power structures based on heterosexual norms. For this reason, Melville is frequently hailed as a trailblazer, one of the most significant early writers in the queer American literary tradition.

At Arrowhead during the winter of 1850–51, Melville worked on *Moby-Dick* from early in the morning through to the afternoon. His sister Augusta would every day copy out the work from the day before, and she wrote in a letter that she found the book “very fine.” After finishing the manuscript, Melville wrote to Hawthorne that “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as a lamb.” Unfortunately, though British reviews contained favorable impressions of the novel, American critics at the time were unappreciative and overwhelmed, complaining that the book was too long, too mystical, and overwrought. A reviewer for *The New York Evangelist* wrote in 1851 that “oddity is the governing character [of *Moby-Dick*]” and that Melville “has reached the very limbo of eccentricity.” In the wake of the public dismissal of both *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, Melville grew increasingly embittered with his readers and reviewers, but continued writing fiction, publishing the novel *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* in 1852. Critics were even more bewildered by this novel, calling it “morbid and unhealthy...[like] a horrid fit of the night-mare.” *Pierre* did not increase Melville’s income or reputation, and neither did his final novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857). Now considered a masterly, metafictional tour-de-force, *The Confidence-Man* confused Melville’s contemporary readership, confirming critics in their opinion that Melville had not developed his potential. He himself knew he had; in a letter to Hawthorne he wrote: “Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter.”

Between 1853 and 1855, Melville turned to a form of fiction that was, at that time, often more lucrative than novels by contributing short stories to *Putnam’s Monthly*. Melville was a keen reader of periodicals, and he created works for *Putnam’s* that reflected the influence of contemporary writers of short fiction, including Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charles Dickens. Melville continued, in these stories, to explore themes from his novels—the dehumanizing effects of capitalist, patriarchal social structures, the inhumanity of white supremacist attitudes, the mystery of the sea, and the draw of travel. He collected six of his stories and published them as *The Piazza Tales* (1856), including the now well-known tales *Benito Cereno*, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” and “The Encantadas.” Reviews for the volume were quite positive, but sales were not, and this disappointment, when paired with the discouraging reception of *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre*, contributed to Melville’s decision to stop writing fiction for the foreseeable future.

The ensuing decade in Melville’s life was a dark one, and one that coincided with the national crisis of the Civil War. In 1856–57, he took a trip to Europe and the Middle East in an attempt to regain his spirits, but things did not improve, and he struggled to support his family on his return. In 1866 he took a job at the New York Custom House, a position he worked for nineteen years, earning four dollars a day. Melville’s mental state deteriorated to a point where his wife Elizabeth nearly left him in 1867; that same year Melville’s eldest son, Malcolm, died by suicide at the age of eighteen.

Melville did not stop writing, however; instead of fiction, he turned to poetry. *Battle-Pieces*, a collection of poems reflecting on the Civil War, was published in 1866; in an appendix, Melville urged the North to treat the South with mercy. His next work, *Clarel* (1876), was a seven-thousand-line poem inspired by his spiritual crisis and by his trip to the Middle East. *Clarel* was Melville’s last publication during his lifetime. Two more books of poetry, *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon* (1891), were printed in runs of twenty-five copies each and circulated privately. Melville’s poetry has, until recently, been largely absent from accounts of American literary history, which long held Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson to be the only great post-bellum nineteenth-century poets. The formal innovations of Melville’s poems are being increasingly recognized, including their shift away from Romantic subjectivity, and scholars are integrating Melville’s three decades of poetic output into a more nuanced history of nineteenth-century American poetry. In addition to another book of poems, *Weeds and Wildings Chiefly*, an unfinished novella, *Billy Budd*, was found in manuscript after Melville’s death in 1891; it was not published until 1924. At once hailed as a masterpiece by Thomas Mann, among others, the story of the execution of the beautiful young sailor has taken its place alongside *Moby-Dick* as one of Melville’s most critically acclaimed and often adapted works.

When Melville died, the *North American Review* printed a notice, which said that he “wrote out of his heart ... [but] his books are now but little read. When he died the other day ... men who could give you the names of fifty living poets and perhaps a hundred living American novelists owned that they had

never heard of Herman Melville.” The *New York Times* encapsulated Melville’s obscurity when it printed a brief article in honor of his life entitled “The Late Hiram Melville.” It was not until the height of the Modernist movement in the 1920s that the so-called “Melville Revival” brought Melville’s work, particularly *Moby-Dick*, into prominence. Raymond Weaver’s *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* (1921) launched the revival, and writers such as Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and Lewis Mumford wrote essays highlighting Melville’s formal and linguistic innovations. His influence on these writers, and on many writers that followed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has been profound; poets such as W.H. Auden and Hart Crane have commemorated Melville in verse, and Ralph Ellison’s groundbreaking novel *Invisible Man* (1952) creatively interprets aspects of *The Confidence-Man* and bears an epigraph drawn from *Benito Cereno*. Melville’s reputation among readers and critics has only increased in the century that followed the Revival, but for a long time his fame was based almost solely on *Moby-Dick*, and to a lesser extent *Billy Budd*; it was not until the 1960s that critics and readers began engaging with the short fiction, and not until even more recently that his poetry has found an appreciative audience.

Twenty-first-century scholars have continued to explore the aesthetic, generic, and formal dimensions of Melville’s work, and his fiction and poetry are essential to discourses in American literary studies on sexuality, transatlanticism, ecocriticism, and race, as well as to conversations around settler colonialism, imperialism, and the excesses of capitalism—his story “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” for example, was an inspirational text for the Occupy Wall Street movement. As American literary studies move away from a nationalist approach and towards a more hemispheric one, Melville has taken on a more global identity—one anticipated, in the 1950s, by the Trinidadian anticolonial activist C.L.R. James’s enthusiastic admiration for him. Melville’s “ruthless democracy,” as he himself called it, made him a voice for the displaced and oppressed; his unwavering commitment to depict the “meanest mariners, and renegades, and castaways” and “weave around them tragic graces” continues to forge connections with new generations of readers, who come to his allusive, complex texts again and again for their sheer linguistic power, but also for their unique ability to bring the reader to the outer edges of perception, where change becomes possible.

NOTE ON THE TEXTS: The texts of Melville’s works presented here are based on their earliest printings. The text of *Moby-Dick* has been prepared while consulting the first American edition of *Moby-Dick*, the first British edition (*The Whale*), and the authoritative Northwestern-Newberry edition (1998). This anthology’s usual practices of modernization have not been followed in the case of *Moby-Dick*; spelling and punctuation from the original printings have been retained. The shorter stories “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and *Benito Cereno* are based on Brian Yothers’s Broadview edition of *The Piazza Tales*, which is in turn based on the 1856 first edition of *The Piazza Tales* published by Dix & Edwards. Where the first edition and the initial magazine publication of the stories in *Putnam’s Monthly* are in substantial conflict, Yothers followed the versions in *The Piazza Tales* (1856). The texts from *Battle-Pieces* are based on the first edition printed in New York by Harper & Brothers in 1866.



from *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*

CHAPTER 42. THE WHITENESS OF THE WHALE.

What the white whale was to Ahab,¹ has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid.

Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.

Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas,² and pearls; and though various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal preeminence in this hue; even the barbaric, grand old kings of Pegu³ placing the title "Lord of the White Elephants" above all their other magniloquent ascriptions of dominion; and the modern kings of Siam⁴ unfurling the same snow-white quadruped in the royal standard; and the Hanoverian flag⁵ bearing the one figure of a snow-white charger; and the great Austrian Empire, Cæsarian heir to overlording Rome,⁶ having for the imperial colour the same impe-

¹ *Ahab* Captain of the *Pequod*, the whaling ship on which the speaker, Ishmael, is embarked as a member of the crew. A grim mystery surrounds Captain Ahab, who lost his leg to a legendary white sperm whale known as Moby Dick and is now obsessed with hunting down and killing the whale. Ahab is described in the Bible as a wicked king who did "evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him" (1 Kings 16.30).

² *japonicas* Flowering camellia plants from Japan.

³ *Pegu* Region that is located in what is now south-central Myanmar.

⁴ *Siam* Thailand.

⁵ *Hanoverian flag* Flag of the Electorate (later Kingdom) of Hanover, a German state from 1692–1807 and again from 1814–37.

⁶ *Austrian Empire ... overlording Rome* The Austrian Empire (1804–1918) evolved from the Holy Roman Empire, the emperor of

rial hue; and though this pre-eminence in it applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe; and though, besides all this, whiteness has been even made significant of gladness, for among the Romans a white stone marked a joyful day; and though in other mortal sympathies and symbolizings, this same hue is made the emblem of many touching, noble things—the innocence of brides, the benignity of age; though among the Red Men of America the giving of the white belt of wampum⁷ was the deepest pledge of honor; though in many climes, whiteness typifies the majesty of Justice in the ermine of the Judge, and contributes to the daily state of kings and queens drawn by milk-white steeds; though even in the higher mysteries of the most august religions it has been made the symbol of the divine spotlessness and power; by the Persian fire worshippers,⁸ the white forked flame being held the holiest on the altar; and in the Greek mythologies, Great Jove himself being made incarnate in a snow-white bull; and though to the noble Iroquois, the midwinter sacrifice of the sacred White Dog was by far the holiest festival of their theology, that spotless, faithful creature being held the purest envoy they could send to the Great Spirit with the annual tidings of their own fidelity; and though directly from the Latin word for white, all Christian priests derive the name of one part of their sacred vesture, the alb or tunic, worn beneath the cassock; and though among the holy pomps of the Romish faith, white is specially employed in the celebration of the Passion of our Lord; though in the Vision of St. John, white robes are given to the redeemed, and the four-and-twenty elders stand clothed in white before the great white throne, and the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool;⁹ yet for all these accumulated asso-

which claimed his legitimacy from the ancient Roman emperors or "Caesars."

⁷ *wampum* Shell beads used by various Indigenous peoples for purposes including gifts, record-keeping, and trade.

⁸ *Persian fire worshippers* Zoroastrians. Members of this faith pray in the presence of fire due to its association with wisdom and spiritual insight. A "fire worshipper" named Fedallah plays a significant role in *Moby-Dick* as Ahab's sinister "shadow" and voice of the fate that supposedly awaits him.

⁹ *Vision of St. John ... wool* See the Book of Revelation (traditionally believed to have been written by St. John), especially 7.9–14, 4.4, and 1.14.

ciations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.

This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds. Witness the white bear of the poles, and the white shark of the tropics; what but their smooth, flaky whiteness makes them the transcendent horrors they are? That ghastly whiteness it is which imparts such an abhorrent mildness, even more loathsome than terrific, to the dumb gloating of their aspect. So that not the fierce-fanged tiger in his heraldic coat can so stagger courage as the white-shrouded bear or shark.¹

Bethink thee of the albatross, whence come those clouds of spiritual wonderment and pale dread, in which that white phantom sails in all imaginations? Not Coleridge first threw that spell;² but God's great, unflattering laureate, Nature.³

¹ [Melville's note] With reference to the Polar bear, it may possibly be urged by him who would fain go still deeper into this matter, that it is not the whiteness, separately regarded, which heightens the intolerable hideousness of that brute; for, analysed, that heightened hideousness, it might be said, only rises from the circumstance, that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of celestial innocence and love; and hence, by bringing together two such opposite emotions in our minds, the Polar bear frightens us with so unnatural a contrast. But even assuming all this to be true; yet, were it not for the whiteness, you would not have that intensified terror.

As for the white shark, the white gliding ghostliness of repose in that creature, when beheld in his ordinary moods, strangely tallies with the same quality in the Polar quadruped. This peculiarity is most vividly hit by the French in the name they bestow upon that fish. The Romish mass for the dead begins with "Requiem eternam" (eternal rest), whence Requiem denominating the mass itself, and any other funeral music. Now, in allusion to the white, silent stillness of death in this shark, and the mild deadliness of his habits, the French call him *Requin*.

² Coleridge ... spell Melville is referring to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous poem featuring an albatross, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798).

³ [Melville's note] I remember the first albatross I ever saw. It was during a prolonged gale, in waters hard upon the Antarctic seas. From my forenoon watch below, I ascended to the overclouded deck; and there, dashed upon the main hatches, I saw a regal, feathery thing of unspotted whiteness, and with a hooked, Roman bill sublime. At intervals, it arched forth its vast archangel wings, as if to

Most famous in our Western annals and Indian traditions is that of the White Steed of the Prairies; a magnificent milk-white charger, large-eyed, small-headed, bluff-chested, and with the dignity of a thousand monarchs in his lofty, overscoring carriage. He was the elected Xerxes⁴ of vast herds of wild horses, whose pastures in those days were only fenced by the Rocky Mountains and the Alleghanies. At their flaming head he westward trooped it like that chosen star which every evening leads on the hosts of light. The flashing cascade of his mane, the curving comet of his tail, invested him with housings⁵ more resplendent than gold and silver-beaters could have furnished him. A most imperial and archangelical apparition of that

embrace some holy ark. Wondrous flutterings and throbbings shook it. Though bodily unharmed, it uttered cries, as some king's ghost in supernatural distress. Through its inexpressible, strange eyes, methought I peeped to secrets which took hold of God. As Abraham before the angels, I bowed myself [see Genesis 18.2]; the white thing was so white, its wings so wide, and in those for ever exiled waters, I had lost the miserable warping memories of traditions and of towns. Long I gazed at that prodigy of plumage. I cannot tell, can only hint, the things that darted through me then. But at last I awoke; and turning, asked a sailor what bird was this. A goney, he replied. Goney! I never had heard that name before; is it conceivable that this glorious thing is utterly unknown to men ashore! never! But some time after, I learned that goney was some seaman's name for albatross. So that by no possibility could Coleridge's wild Rhyme have had aught to do with those mystical impressions which were mine, when I saw that bird upon our deck. For neither had I then read the Rhyme, nor knew the bird to be an albatross. Yet, in saying this, I do but indirectly burnish a little brighter the noble merit of the poem and the poet.

I assert, then, that in the wondrous bodily whiteness of the bird chiefly lurks the secret of the spell; a truth the more evinced in this, that by a solecism of terms there are birds called grey albatrosses; and these I have frequently seen, but never with such emotions as when I beheld the Antarctic fowl.

But how had the mystic thing been caught? Whisper it not, and I will tell; with a treacherous hook and line, as the fowl floated on the sea. At last the Captain made a postman of it; tying a lettered, leathern tally [stick with carved messages] round its neck, with the ship's time and place; and then letting it escape. But I doubt not, that leathern tally, meant for man, was taken off in Heaven, when the white fowl flew to join the wing-folding, the invoking, and adoring cherubim!

⁴ Xerxes King of Persia (c. 518–465 BCE) who gained inherited, not elected, power.

⁵ housings Trappings or ornaments that extend from the horse's saddle over its back and sides.

unfallen, western world,¹ which to the eyes of the old trappers and hunters revived the glories of those primeval times when Adam walked majestic as a god, bluff-browed and fearless as this mighty steed. Whether marching amid his aides and marshals in the van² of countless cohorts that endlessly streamed it over the plains, like an Ohio; or whether with his circumambient subjects browsing all around at the horizon, the White Steed gallopingly reviewed them with warm nostrils reddening through his cool milkiness; in whatever aspect he presented himself, always to the bravest Indians he was the object of trembling reverence and awe. Nor can it be questioned from what stands on legendary record of this noble horse, that it was his spiritual whiteness chiefly, which so clothed him with divineness; and that this divineness had that in it which, though commanding worship, at the same time enforced a certain nameless terror.

But there are other instances where this whiteness loses all that accessory and strange glory which invests it in the White Steed and Albatross.

What is it that in the Albino man so peculiarly repels and often shocks the eye, as that sometimes he is loathed by his own kith³ and kin! It is that whiteness which invests him, a thing expressed by the name he bears.⁴ The Albino is as well made as other men—has no substantive deformity—and yet this mere aspect of all-pervading whiteness makes him more strangely hideous than the ugliest abortion.⁵ Why should this be so?

Nor, in quite other aspects, does Nature in her least palpable but not the less malicious agencies, fail to enlist among her forces this crowning attribute of the terrible. From its snowy aspect, the gauntleted ghost of the Southern Seas has been denominated the White Squall. Nor, in some historic instances, has the art of human malice omitted so potent an auxiliary. How wildly it heightens the effect of that passage in

Froissart, when, masked in the snowy symbol of their faction, the desperate White Hoods of Ghent murder their bailiff in the market-place!⁶

Nor, in some things, does the common, hereditary experience of all mankind fail to bear witness to the supernaturalism of this hue. It cannot well be doubted, that the one visible quality in the aspect of the dead which most appals the gazer, is the marble pallor lingering there; as if indeed that pallor were as much like the badge of consternation in the other world, as of mortal trepidation here. And from that pallor of the dead, we borrow the expressive hue of the shroud in which we wrap them. Nor even in our superstitions do we fail to throw the same snowy mantle round our phantoms; all ghosts rising in a milk-white fog—Yea, while these terrors seize us, let us add, that even the king of terrors, when personified by the evangelist, rides on his pallid horse.⁷

Therefore, in his other moods, symbolize whatever grand or gracious thing he will by whiteness, no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance it calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul.

But though without dissent this point be fixed, how is mortal man to account for it? To analyse it, would seem impossible. Can we, then, by the citation of some of those instances wherein this thing of whiteness—though for the time either wholly or in great part stripped of all direct associations calculated to impart to it aught fearful, but nevertheless, is found to exert over us the same sorcery, however modified;—can we thus hope to light upon some chance clue to conduct us to the hidden cause we seek?

Let us try. But in a matter like this, subtlety appeals to subtlety, and without imagination no man can follow another into these halls. And though, doubtless, some at least of the imaginative impressions about to be presented may have been shared by most men,

¹ *unfallen, western world* North America before European colonial encroachment.

² *van* Forefront.

³ *kith* Friends and acquaintances.

⁴ *Albino ... name he bears* "Albino" is a borrowing from Portuguese, referring to a person lacking the pigment melanin; the term is based on the Latin "albus," meaning "white."

⁵ *abortion* In this context, a person imperfectly made, a monstrosity.

⁶ *Froissart ... market-place* This description is from the *Chronicles* (written c. 1379–c. 1405) of the medieval French historian Jean Froissart. The White Hoods were a militia in medieval Ghent and Bruges; in the incident referred to here, a city bailiff was sent to arrest the leaders of the White Hoods, but the White Hoods kill the bailiff before he can do so.

⁷ *king of terrors ... pallid horse* See Revelation 6.8, attributed to St. John the Evangelist: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him."

yet few perhaps were entirely conscious of them at the time, and therefore may not be able to recall them now.

Why to the man of untutored ideality,¹ who happens to be but loosely acquainted with the peculiar character of the day, does the bare mention of Whitsuntide² marshal in the fancy such long, dreary, speechless processions of slow-pacing pilgrims, down-cast and hooded with new-fallen snow? Or, to the unread, unsophisticated Protestant of the Middle American States, why does the passing mention of a White Friar or a White Nun,³ evoke such an eyeless statue in the soul?

Or what is there apart from the traditions of dungeoned warriors and kings (which will not wholly account for it) that makes the White Tower of London tell so much more strongly on the imagination of an untravelled American, than those other storied structures, its neighbors—the Byward Tower, or even the Bloody?⁴ And those sublimer towers, the White Mountains of New Hampshire, whence, in peculiar moods, comes that gigantic ghostliness over the soul at the bare mention of that name, while the thought of Virginia's Blue Ridge is full of a soft, dewy, distant dreaminess? Or why, irrespective of all latitudes and longitudes, does the name of the White Sea exert such a spectralness over the fancy, while that of the Yellow Sea⁵ lulls us with mortal thoughts of long lacquered mild afternoons on the waves, followed by the gaudiest and yet sleepest of sunsets? Or, to choose a wholly

unsubstantial instance, purely addressed to the fancy, why, in reading the old fairy tales of Central Europe, does “the tall pale man” of the Hartz forests, whose changeless pallor unrustingly glides through the green of the groves—why is this phantom more terrible than all the whooping imps of the Blocksburg?⁶

Nor is it, altogether, the remembrance of her cathedral-toppling earthquakes; nor the stampedes of her frantic seas; nor the tearlessness of arid skies that never rain;⁷ nor the sight of her wide field of leaning spires, wrenched cope-stones, and crosses all adroop (like canted yards⁸ of anchored fleets); and her suburban avenues of house-walls lying over upon each other, as a tossed pack of cards;⁹—it is not these things alone which make tearless Lima, the strangest, saddest city thou canst see. For Lima has taken the white veil;¹⁰ and there is a higher horror in this whiteness of her woe. Old as Pizarro,¹¹ this whiteness keeps her ruins for ever new; admits not the cheerful greenness of complete decay; spreads over her broken ramparts the rigid pallor of an apoplexy¹² that fixes its own distortions.

I know that, to the common apprehension, this phenomenon of whiteness is not confessed to be the prime agent in exaggerating the terror of objects otherwise terrible; nor to the unimaginative mind is there aught of terror in those appearances whose awfulness to another mind almost solely consists in this one phenomenon, especially when exhibited under any form at all approaching to muteness or universality. What I

¹ *ideality* Imaginativeness.

² *Whitsuntide* Church season of Pentecost, beginning on Whitsunday (a contraction of “White Sunday”), that celebrated the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. Confirmation and baptismal ceremonies are frequently held on Pentecost, for which white robes are traditionally worn.

³ *White Friar* ... *White Nun* Ghostly nuns and friars are common motifs in Gothic fiction.

⁴ *White Tower* ... *Byward Tower* ... *Bloody* Individual towers in the fortress known as the Tower of London. The White Tower, built between 1078 and 1097, is the keep of the castle and housed soldiers and acted as a prison. It was whitewashed inside and out in 1240 on the orders of Henry III. The Bloody Tower was built between 1238 and 1272 and was thought to be the site of the murder of the two “Princes in the Tower”—Edward V and his brother the Duke of York—as well as the site of the death of Henry VI. Byward Tower, also built between 1238 and 1272, was the gatehouse to the Outer Ward of the fortress.

⁵ *White Sea* Inlet of the Barents Sea off the northwest Russian coast; *Yellow Sea* Inlet off the Pacific Ocean between China and the Korean peninsula.

⁶ *tall pale man* ... *Hartz forests* Der Grossman, or the “Tall Man” or “Slenderman” is a medieval folktale figure who lives in the Black Forest, luring children to the woods; *imps of the Blocksburg* Blocksberg is the highest mountain in the Harz range in Germany; the mountain has long been thought to be peopled with devils and witches.

⁷ *never rain* Lima, Peru, receives less than two inches of rain per year.

⁸ *canted yards* Supports for the sails that are tilted while a vessel is at anchor.

⁹ *wrenched* ... *cards* An earthquake in 1746 caused extensive damage to Lima, which was still evident when Melville visited in 1844.

¹⁰ *Lima* ... *white veil* Some of the most prominent architecture in Lima at this time was made with white stone (the Presidential Palace, the Cathedral of Lima, the Archbishop's Palace, and Aliaga House, for example). When initiates become nuns, they “take the white veil” as a symbolic representation of their marriage with Christ.

¹¹ *Pizarro* Francisco Pizarro (c. 1470–1541) founded Lima in 1535.

¹² *apoplexy* Sudden loss of consciousness, a stroke.

mean by these two statements may perhaps be respectively elucidated by the following examples.

First: The mariner, when drawing nigh the coasts of foreign lands, if by night he hear the roar of breakers, starts to vigilance, and feels just enough of trepidation to sharpen all his faculties; but under precisely similar circumstances, let him be called from his hammock to view his ship sailing through a midnight sea of milky whiteness—as if from encircling headlands shoals of combed white bears were swimming round him, then he feels a silent, superstitious dread; the shrouded phantom of the whitened waters is horrible to him as a real ghost; in vain the lead assures him he is still off soundings;¹ heart and helm they both go down; he never rests till blue water is under him again. Yet where is the mariner who will tell thee, “Sir, it was not so much the fear of striking hidden rocks, as the fear of that hideous whiteness that so stirred me”?

Second: To the native Indian of Peru, the continual sight of the snow-howdah² Andes conveys naught of dread, except, perhaps, in the mere fancying of the eternal frosted desolateness reigning at such vast altitudes, and the natural conceit of what a fearfulness it would be to lose oneself in such inhuman solitudes. Much the same is it with the backwoodsman of the West, who with comparative indifference views an unbounded prairie sheeted with driven snow, no shadow of tree or twig to break the fixed trance of whiteness. Not so the sailor, beholding the scenery of the Antarctic seas; where at times, by some infernal trick of legerdemain³ in the powers of frost and air, he, shivering and half shipwrecked, instead of rainbows speaking hope and solace to his misery, views what seems a boundless church-yard grinning upon him with its lean ice monuments and splintered crosses.

But thou sayest, methinks that white-lead⁴ chapter about whiteness is but a white flag hung out from a craven soul; thou surrenderest to a hypo,⁵ Ishmael.

¹ *off soundings* In water deep enough that the soundings—the lines and weights used to test the depth of surrounding water—do not hit bottom.

² *snow-howdah* Snow-topped (a howdah is the structure placed on top of an elephant’s back to seat riders).

³ *legerdemain* Sleight of hand.

⁴ *white-lead* Carbonate of lead used to make white pigments.

⁵ *hypo* Episode of anxiety or hypochondria.

Tell me, why this strong young colt, foaled in some peaceful valley of Vermont, far removed from all beasts of prey—why is it that upon the sunniest day, if you but shake a fresh buffalo robe behind him, so that he cannot even see it, but only smells its wild animal muskiness—why will he start, snort, and with bursting eyes paw the ground in phrensies⁶ of affright? There is no remembrance in him of any gorings of wild creatures in his green northern home, so that the strange muskiness he smells cannot recall to him anything associated with the experience of former perils; for what knows he, this New England colt, of the black bisons of distant Oregon?

No: but here thou beholdest even in a dumb brute, the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world. Though thousands of miles from Oregon, still when he smells that savage musk, the rending, goring bison herds are as present as to the deserted wild foal of the prairies, which this instant they may be trampling into dust.

Thus, then, the muffled rollings of a milky sea; the bleak rustlings of the festooned frosts of mountains; the desolate shiftings of the windrowed⁷ snows of prairies; all these, to Ishmael, are as the shaking of that buffalo robe to the frightened colt!

Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist. Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.

But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul; and more strange and far more portentous—why, as we have seen, it is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian’s Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind.

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much

⁶ *phrensies* I.e., frenzies.

⁷ *windrowed* Blown into rows by the wind.

a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers,¹ that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within;² and when we proceed

further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses³ upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?

—1851

¹ *natural philosophers* Those studying the physical and natural world, precursors to today's scientists. Some, such as John Locke (1628–1704), believed that “secondary” qualities in physical objects (like color) are painted on by the mind and are not inherent in the object itself.

² *allurements ... within* See Matthew 23:27: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.”

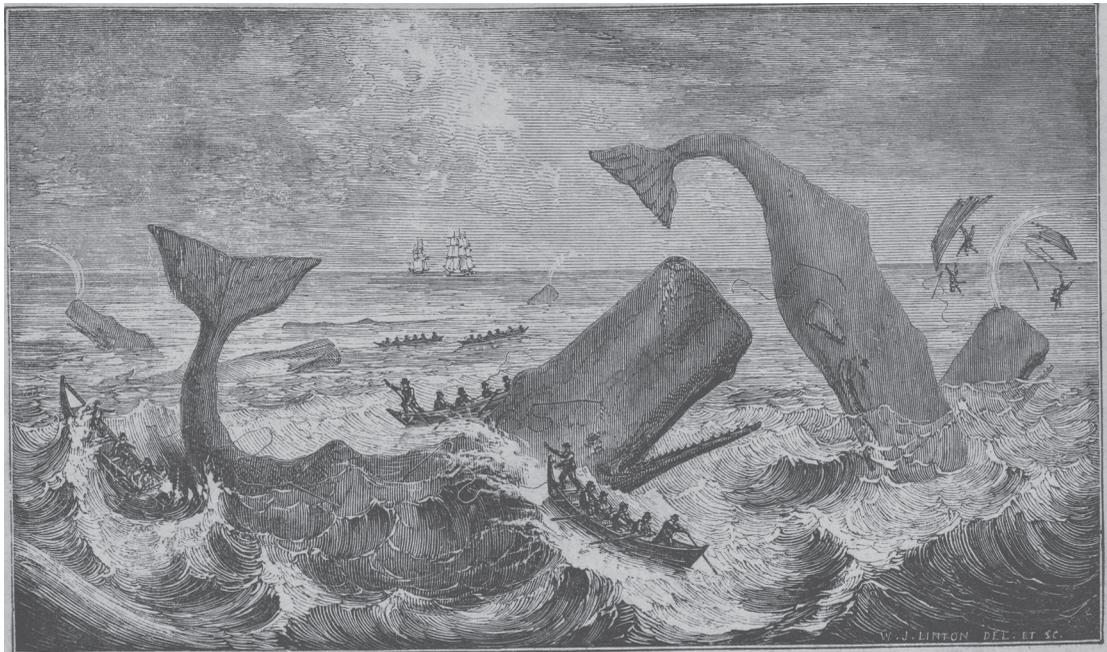
³ *colored and coloring glasses* I.e., sunglasses.

IN CONTEXT

Nineteenth-Century Images of Whales and Whaling



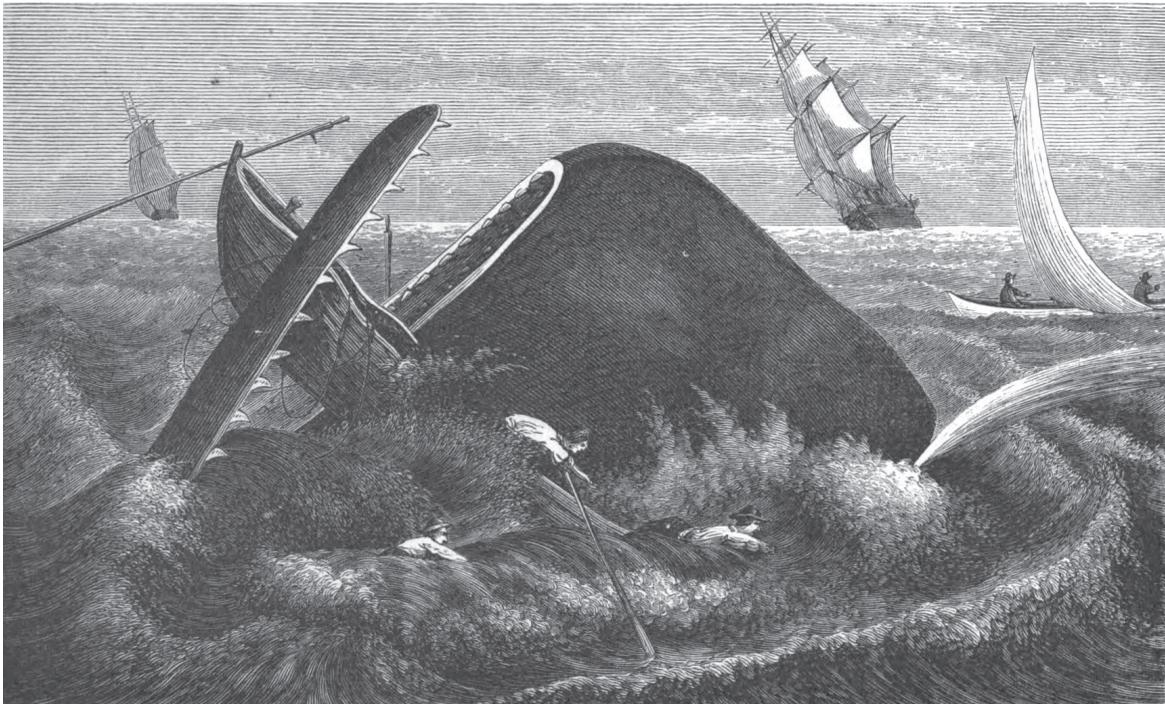
The Essex Struck by a Whale, from *The Mariner's Chronicle*, 1834. New Bedford Whaling Museum. This is one of the earliest images depicting the *Essex* disaster to be printed in the United States.



William James Linton, *Boats Attacking Whales*, 1830–39. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.



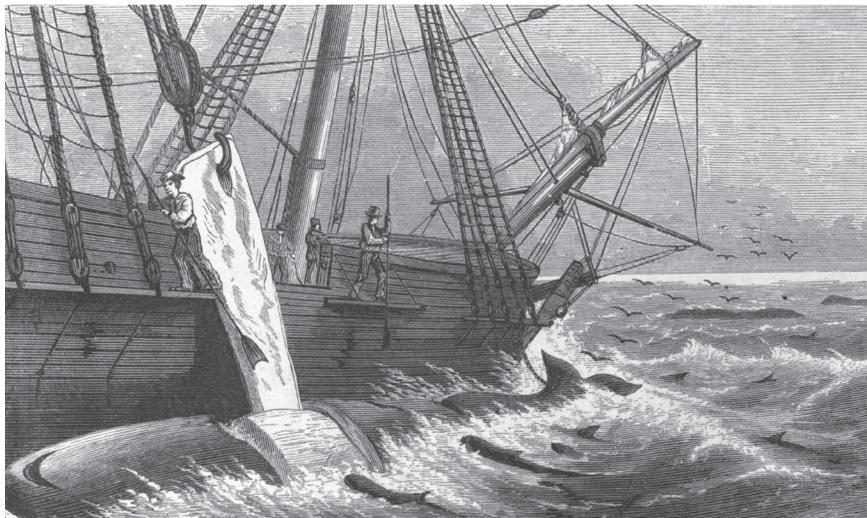
Unknown artist, engraved sperm whale tooth (skrimshander), depicting large sperm whale spouting blood, c. mid-nineteenth century. Nantucket Historical Association.



In the Whale's Jaw, frontispiece from William S. Davis, *Nimrod of the Sea: or, The American Whaleman*, 1874.



There She Blows, illustration from William S. Davis, *Nimrod of the Sea: or, The American Whaleman*, 1874.



Cutting In, illustration from William S. Davis, *Nimrod of the Sea: or, The American Whaleman*, 1874.

Bartleby, the Scrivener

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations, for the last thirty years, has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom, as yet, nothing, that I know of, has ever been written—I mean, the law-copyists, or scriveners.¹ I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and, if I pleased, could relate diverse histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners, for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener, the strangest I ever saw, or heard of. While, of other law-copyists, I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report, which will appear in the sequel.²

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my *employés*,³ my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented. *Imprimis*:⁴ I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws

down public applause; but, in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds. All who know me, consider me an eminently *safe* man. The late John Jacob Astor,⁵ a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat; for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion.⁶ I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion.

Some time prior to the period at which this little history begins, my avocations had been largely increased. The good old office, now extinct in the State of New York, of a Master in Chancery,⁷ had been conferred upon me. It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative. I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages; but, I must be permitted to be rash here, and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a ———⁸ premature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. But this is by the way.

My chambers were up stairs, at No. ——— Wall street. At one end, they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom.

This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call "life." But, if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction, my windows commanded an

¹ *avocations* Employments, vocations; *scriveners* People employed to copy or write documents.

² *sequel* Refers not to a follow-up story, but to the "vague report" that is relayed to the reader at the end of this story.

³ *employés* French: employees.

⁴ *Imprimis* Latin: In the first place; often used by lawyers to introduce the first in a list of items (in a will, for instance).

⁵ *John Jacob Astor* Wealthy American businessperson (1763–1848) who made his fortune in the fur trade.

⁶ *orbicular* Spherical; *bullion* Raw gold or silver.

⁷ *Master in Chancery* Senior supervisory role at the Court of Chancery. The New York Chancery Court, which existed from 1701 to 1847, dealt with equity matters and functioned as a court of appeals for the state Supreme Court.

⁸ *abrogation ... new Constitution* The Court of Chancery was abolished in 1847 when the New York state judicial system was overhauled in accordance with the State Constitutional Convention of 1846; ——— The dashes are marking an expletive.

unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass¹ to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern.²

At the period just preceding the advent of *Bartleby*, I had two persons as copyists in my employment, and a promising lad as an office-boy. First, Turkey; second, Nippers; third, Ginger Nut. These may seem names, the like of which are not usually found in the Directory. In truth, they were nicknames, mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks, and were deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters. Turkey was a short, pury³ Englishman, of about my own age—that is, somewhere not far from sixty. In the morning, one might say, his face was of a fine florid hue, but after twelve o'clock, meridian⁴—his dinner hour—it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; and continued blazing—but, as it were, with a gradual wane—till six o'clock, P.M., or thereabouts; after which, I saw no more of the proprietor of the face, which, gaining its meridian with the sun, seemed to set with it, to rise, culminate, and decline the following day, with the like regularity and undiminished glory. There are many singular coincidences I have known in the course of my life, not the least among which was the fact, that, exactly when Turkey displayed his fullest beams from his red and radiant countenance, just then, too, at that critical moment, began the daily period when I considered his business capacities as seriously disturbed for the remainder of the twenty-four hours. Not that he was absolutely idle, or averse to business, then; far from it. The difficulty was, he was apt to be altogether too energetic. There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him. He would be incautious in dipping his pen into his ink-stand. All his blots upon my documents were dropped there after twelve o'clock, meridian. Indeed, not only

would he be reckless, and sadly given to making blots in the afternoon, but, some days, he went further, and was rather noisy. At such times, too, his face flamed with augmented blazonry, as if cannel coal had been heaped on anthracite.⁵ He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box;⁶ in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up, and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner, very sad to behold in an elderly man like him. Nevertheless, as he was in many ways a most valuable person to me, and all the time before twelve o'clock, meridian, was the quickest, steadiest creature, too, accomplishing a great deal of work in a style not easily to be matched—for these reasons, I was willing to overlook his eccentricities, though, indeed, occasionally, I remonstrated with him. I did this very gently, however, because, though the civilest, nay, the blandest and most reverential of men in the morning, yet, in the afternoon, he was disposed, upon provocation, to be slightly rash with his tongue—in fact, insolent. Now, valuing his morning services as I did, and resolved not to lose them—yet, at the same time, made uncomfortable by his inflamed ways after twelve o'clock—and being a man of peace, unwilling by my admonitions to call forth unseemly retorts from him, I took upon me, one Saturday noon (he was always worse on Saturdays)⁷ to hint to him, very kindly, that, perhaps, now that he was growing old, it might be well to abridge his labors; in short, he need not come to my chambers after twelve o'clock, but, dinner over, had best go home to his lodgings, and rest himself till tea-time.⁸ But no; he insisted upon his afternoon devotions. His countenance became intolerably fervid, as he oratorically assured me—gesticulating with a long ruler at the other end of the room—that if his services

¹ *spy-glass* Telescope.

² *cistern* Water tank (often these were set high up on a building to supply it with water).

³ *pury* Fat.

⁴ *meridian* Noon.

⁵ *blazonry* The art of depicting armorial symbols, but in this case used figuratively to mean “coloring”; *cannel coal* Hard coal with a bright flame; *anthracite* Hard, high-quality coal that burns with little flame or smoke.

⁶ *sand-box* Box filled with sand used to blot ink.

⁷ *on Saturdays* It was customary to work a six-day work week in the nineteenth century (the five-day work week was only instituted in the U.S. in the mid-twentieth century).

⁸ *tea-time* Four or five o'clock in the afternoon.

in the morning were useful, how indispensable, then, in the afternoon?

"With submission, sir," said Turkey, on this occasion, "I consider myself your right-hand man. In the morning I but marshal and deploy my columns; but in the afternoon I put myself at their head, and gallantly charge the foe, thus"—and he made a violent thrust with the ruler.

"But the blots, Turkey," intimated I.

"True; but, with submission, sir, behold these hairs! I am getting old. Surely, sir, a blot or two of a warm afternoon is not to be severely urged against gray hairs. Old age—even if it blot the page—is honorable. With submission, sir, we *both* are getting old."

This appeal to my fellow-feeling was hardly to be resisted. At all events, I saw that go he would not. So, I made up my mind to let him stay, resolving, nevertheless, to see to it that, during the afternoon, he had to do with my less important papers.

Nippers, the second on my list, was a whiskered, fallow, and, upon the whole, rather piratical-looking young man, of about five and twenty. I always deemed him the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion. The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist, an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents. The indigestion seemed betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes committed in copying; unnecessary maledictions, hissed, rather than spoken, in the heat of business; and especially by a continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked. Though of a very ingenious mechanical turn, Nippers could never get this table to suit him. He put chips under it, blocks of various sorts, bits of pasteboard, and at last went so far as to attempt an exquisite adjustment, by final pieces of folded blotting-paper. But no invention would answer.¹ If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up towards his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk, then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands, and stooped over it in writing, then there was

a sore aching in his back. In short, the truth of the matter was, Nippers knew not what he wanted. Or, if he wanted anything, it was to be rid of a scrivener's table altogether. Among the manifestations of his diseased ambition was a fondness he had for receiving visits from certain ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats, whom he called his clients. Indeed, I was aware that not only was he, at times, considerable of a ward-politician, but he occasionally did a little business at the Justices' courts, and was not unknown on the steps of the Tombs.² I have good reason to believe, however, that one individual who called upon him at my chambers, and who, with a grand air, he insisted was his client, was no other than a dun,³ and the alleged title-deed, a bill. But, with all his failings, and the annoyances he caused me, Nippers, like his compatriot Turkey, was a very useful man to me; wrote a neat, swift hand; and, when he chose, was not deficient in a gentlemanly sort of deportment. Added to this, he always dressed in a gentlemanly sort of way; and so, incidentally, reflected credit upon my chambers. Whereas, with respect to Turkey, I had much ado to keep him from being a reproach to me. His clothes were apt to look oily, and smell of eating-houses. He wore his pantaloons very loose and baggy in summer. His coats were execrable; his hat not to be handled. But while the hat was a thing of indifference to me, inasmuch as his natural civility and deference, as a dependent⁴ Englishman, always led him to doff it the moment he entered the room, yet his coat was another matter. Concerning his coats, I reasoned with him; but with no effect. The truth was, I suppose, that a man with so small an income could not afford to sport such

² *considerable of a ward-politician* Of importance to a local politician; this phrase can also be interpreted to mean that Nippers has ambitions of becoming a local politician; *Justices' courts* I.e., the courts of the State judges; *the Tombs* Informal name for the city prison, known formally as the New York City Halls of Justice and House of Detention. Built in the Egyptian Revival style, the prison was situated on what had been the Collect Pond. The area had been drained and filled in, but not very successfully, and soon after the Tombs was built it began to sink into the ground, creating damp and unhealthy conditions for the inmates. After visiting the prison in 1842, Charles Dickens wrote that "such indecent and disgusting dungeons as these cells, would bring disgrace upon the most despotic empire in the world."

³ *dun* Debt collector.

⁴ *dependent* Subordinate.

¹ *answer* Suffice.

a lustrous face and a lustrous coat at one and the same time. As Nippers once observed, Turkey's money went chiefly for red ink.¹ One winter day, I presented Turkey with a highly respectable-looking coat of my own—a padded gray coat, of a most comfortable warmth, and which buttoned straight up from the knee to the neck. I thought Turkey would appreciate the favor, and abate his rashness and obstreperousness of afternoons. But no; I verily believe that buttoning himself up in so downy and blanket-like a coat had a pernicious effect upon him—upon the same principle that too much oats are bad for horses. In fact, precisely as a rash, restive horse is said to feel his oats, so Turkey felt his coat. It made him insolent. He was a man whom prosperity harmed.

Though, concerning the self-indulgent habits of Turkey, I had my own private surmises, yet, touching Nippers, I was well persuaded that, whatever might be his faults in other respects, he was, at least, a temperate² young man. But, indeed, nature herself seemed to have been his vintner, and, at his birth, charged him so thoroughly with an irritable, brandy-like disposition, that all subsequent potations³ were needless. When I consider how, amid the stillness of my chambers, Nippers would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, and stooping over his table, spread his arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him, I plainly perceive that, for Nippers, brandy-and-water were altogether superfluous.

It was fortunate for me that, owing to its peculiar cause—indigestion—the irritability and consequent nervousness of Nippers were mainly observable in the morning, while in the afternoon he was comparatively mild. So that, Turkey's paroxysms only coming on about twelve o'clock, I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other, like guards. When Nippers's was on, Turkey's was off; and *vice versa*. This was a good natural arrangement, under the circumstances.

Ginger Nut, the third on my list, was a lad, some twelve years old. His father was a car-man,⁴ ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart, before he died. So he sent him to my office, as student at law, errand-boy, cleaner and sweeper, at the rate of one dollar a week. He had a little desk to himself, but he did not use it much. Upon inspection, the drawer exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts. Indeed, to this quick-witted youth, the whole noble science of the law was contained in a nut-shell. Not the least among the employments of Ginger Nut, as well as one which he discharged with the most alacrity, was his duty as cake and apple purveyor for Turkey and Nippers. Copying law-papers being proverbially a dry, husky⁵ sort of business, my two scribes were fain to moisten their mouths very often with Spitzbergers,⁶ to be had at the numerous stalls nigh the Custom House and Post Office. Also, they sent Ginger Nut very frequently for that peculiar cake—small, flat, round, and very spicy—after which he had been named by them. Of a cold morning, when business was but dull, Turkey would gobble up scores of these cakes, as if they were mere wafers—indeed, they sell them at the rate of six or eight for a penny—the scrape of his pen blending with the crunching of the crisp particles in his mouth. Of all the fiery afternoon blunders and flurried rashnesses of Turkey, was his once moistening a ginger-cake between his lips, and clapping it on to a mortgage, for a seal. I came within an ace⁷ of dismissing him then. But he mollified me by making an oriental bow, and saying—

“With submission, sir, it was generous of me to find you in stationery on my own account.”

Now my original business—that of a conveyancer and title hunter,⁸ and drawer-up of recondite documents of all sorts—was considerably increased by receiving the master's office. There was now great work for scribes. Not only must I push the clerks already with me, but I must have additional help.

¹ *red ink* Wine.

² *temperate* Moderate, avoiding alcohol.

³ *vintner* Seller of wine; *potations* Alcoholic drinks.

⁴ *car-man* A person who drives a cart.

⁵ *husky* Tough and dry like husks.

⁶ *Spitzbergers* Variety of apple.

⁷ *came within an ace* Was on the point of.

⁸ *conveyancer* Lawyer who prepares documents for the exchange of property; *title hunter* Lawyer who investigates the legal ownership of land and property.

In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby.

After a few words touching his qualifications, I engaged him, glad to have among my corps of copyists a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers.

I should have stated before that ground glass folding-doors divided my premises into two parts, one of which was occupied by my scriveners, the other by myself. According to my humor, I threw open these doors, or closed them. I resolved to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding-doors, but on my side of them, so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done. I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined.

At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line,¹ copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically.

It is, of course, an indispensable part of a scrivener's business to verify the accuracy of his copy, word by word. Where there are two or more scriveners in an office, they assist each other in this examination, one reading from the copy, the other holding the original. It is a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair. I can

readily imagine that, to some sanguine² temperaments, it would be altogether intolerable. For example, I cannot credit that the mettlesome poet, Byron,³ would have contentedly sat down with Bartleby to examine a law document of, say five hundred pages, closely written in a crimpy⁴ hand.

Now and then, in the haste of business, it had been my habit to assist in comparing some brief document myself, calling Turkey or Nippers for this purpose. One object I had, in placing Bartleby so handy to me behind the screen, was, to avail myself of his services on such trivial occasions. It was on the third day, I think, of his being with me, and before any necessity had arisen for having his own writing examined, that, being much hurried to complete a small affair I had in hand, I abruptly called to Bartleby. In my haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance, I sat with my head bent over the original on my desk, and my right hand sideways, and somewhat nervously extended with the copy, so that, immediately upon emerging from his retreat, Bartleby might snatch it and proceed to business without the least delay.

In this very attitude did I sit when I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, “I would prefer not to.”

I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume; but in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, “I would prefer not to.”

“Prefer not to,” echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. “What do you mean? Are you moon-struck?⁵ I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it,” and I thrust it towards him.

² *sanguine* Brave and amorous.

³ *Byron* George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824), a Romantic poet famous for his passionate and energetic personality as well as for his verse.

⁴ *crimpy* Wobbly.

⁵ *moon-struck* Insane (the moon was long thought to unsettle the mental faculties).

¹ *ran . . . line* I.e., he copied both day and night.

"I would prefer not to," said he.

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero¹ out of doors. I stood gazing at him awhile, as he went on with his own writing, and then reseated myself at my desk. This is very strange, thought I. What had one best do? But my business hurried me. I concluded to forget the matter for the present, reserving it for my future leisure. So calling Nippers from the other room, the paper was speedily examined.

A few days after this, Bartleby concluded four lengthy documents, being quadruplicates of a week's testimony taken before me in my High Court of Chancery. It became necessary to examine them. It was an important suit, and great accuracy was imperative. Having all things arranged, I called Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut, from the next room, meaning to place the four copies in the hands of my four clerks, while I should read from the original. Accordingly, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut had taken their seats in a row, each with his document in his hand, when I called to Bartleby to join this interesting group.

"Bartleby! quick, I am waiting."

I heard a slow scrape of his chair legs on the uncarpeted floor, and soon he appeared standing at the entrance of his hermitage.

"What is wanted?" said he, mildly.

"The copies, the copies," said I, hurriedly. "We are going to examine them. There"—and I held towards him the fourth quadruplicate.

"I would prefer not to," he said, and gently disappeared behind the screen.

For a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt,² standing at the head of my seated column of clerks.

Recovering myself, I advanced towards the screen, and demanded the reason for such extraordinary conduct.

"*Why* do you refuse?"

"I would prefer not to."

With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful³ manner, touched and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him.

"These are your own copies we are about to examine. It is labor saving to you, because one examination will answer for your four papers. It is common usage. Every copyist is bound to help examine his copy. Is it not so? Will you not speak? Answer!"

"I prefer not to," he replied in a flutelike tone. It seemed to me that, while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did.

"You are decided, then, not to comply with my request—a request made according to common usage and common sense?"

He briefly gave me to understand, that on that point my judgment was sound. Yes: his decision was irreversible.

It is not seldom the case that, when a man is brow-beaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side. Accordingly, if any disinterested persons are present, he turns to them for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind.

"Turkey," said I, "what do you think of this? Am I not right?"

"With submission, sir," said Turkey, in his blandest tone, "I think that you are."

"Nippers," said I, "what do *you* think of it?"

"I think I should kick him out of the office."

¹ *Cicero* Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE) was a Roman lawyer and consul admired for his intellect, oratorical skills, and integrity.

² *pillar of salt* In chapter 15 of the book of Genesis, God rains fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, but angels warn Lot and

his wife and daughters to flee to the mountains without looking back before the destruction comes. Lot's wife does look back and is turned into a pillar of salt.

³ *wonderful* Astonishing, unusual.

(The reader, of nice¹ perceptions, will here perceive that, it being morning, Turkey's answer is couched in polite and tranquil terms, but Nippers replies in ill-tempered ones. Or, to repeat a previous sentence, Nippers's ugly mood was on duty, and Turkey's off.)

"Ginger Nut," said I, willing to enlist the smallest suffrage in my behalf, "what do *you* think of it?"

"I think, sir, he's a little *lunny*,"² replied Ginger Nut, with a grin.

"You hear what they say," said I, turning towards the screen, "come forth and do your duty."

But he vouchsafed no reply. I pondered a moment in sore perplexity. But once more business hurried me. I determined again to postpone the consideration of this dilemma to my future leisure. With a little trouble we made out to examine the papers without Bartleby, though at every page or two Turkey deferentially dropped his opinion, that this proceeding was quite out of the common; while Nippers, twitching in his chair with a dyspeptic³ nervousness, ground out, between his set teeth, occasional hissing maledictions against the stubborn oaf behind the screen. And for his (Nippers's) part, this was the first and the last time he would do another man's business without pay.

Meanwhile Bartleby sat in his hermitage, oblivious to everything but his own peculiar business there.

Some days passed, the scrivener being employed upon another lengthy work. His late remarkable conduct led me to regard his ways narrowly. I observed that he never went to dinner; indeed, that he never went anywhere. As yet I had never, of my personal knowledge, known him to be outside of my office. He was a perpetual sentry in the corner. At about eleven o'clock though, in the morning, I noticed that Ginger Nut would advance toward the opening in Bartleby's screen, as if silently beckoned thither by a gesture invisible to me where I sat. The boy would then leave the office, jingling a few pence, and reappear with a handful of ginger-nuts, which he delivered in the hermitage, receiving two of the cakes for his trouble.

He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian,

then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called, because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavoring one. Now, what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably, he preferred it should have none.

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. If the individual so resisted be of a not inhumane temper, and the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity, then, in the better moods of the former, he will endeavor charitably to construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgment. Even so, for the most part, I regarded Bartleby and his ways. Poor fellow! thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary. He is useful to me. I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less-indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience. But this mood was not invariable, with me. The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me. I felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition—to elicit some angry spark from him answerable to my own. But, indeed, I might as well have essayed to strike fire with my knuckles against a bit of Windsor soap.⁴ But one afternoon the evil impulse in me mastered me, and the following little scene ensued:

"Bartleby," said I, "when those papers are all copied, I will compare them with you."

"I would prefer not to."

"How? Surely you do not mean to persist in that mulish vagary?"

No answer.

I threw open the folding-doors near by, and, turning upon Turkey and Nippers, exclaimed:

¹ *nice* Accurate, discerning, discriminating.

² *lunny* I.e., loony, the shortened form of lunatic, which is another way of saying "moon-struck" ("luna" means "moon" in Latin).

³ *dyspeptic* Uneasy, uncomfortable (resulting from indigestion).

⁴ *Windsor soap* Brown, scented soap.

"Bartleby a second time says, he won't examine his papers. What do you think of it, Turkey?"

It was afternoon, be it remembered. Turkey sat glowing like a brass boiler; his bald head steaming; his hands reeling among his blotted papers.

"Think of it?" roared Turkey; "I think I'll just step behind his screen, and black his eyes for him!"

So saying, Turkey rose to his feet and threw his arms into a pugilistic¹ position. He was hurrying away to make good his promise, when I detained him, alarmed at the effect of incautiously rousing Turkey's combativeness after dinner.

"Sit down, Turkey," said I, "and hear what Nippers has to say. What do you think of it, Nippers? Would I not be justified in immediately dismissing Bartleby?"

"Excuse me, that is for you to decide, sir. I think his conduct quite unusual, and, indeed, unjust, as regards Turkey and myself. But it may only be a passing whim."

"Ah," exclaimed I, "you have strangely changed your mind, then—you speak very gently of him now."

"All beer," cried Turkey; "gentleness is effects of beer—Nippers and I dined together to-day. You see how gentle *I* am, sir. Shall I go and black his eyes?"

"You refer to Bartleby, I suppose. No, not to-day, Turkey," I replied; "pray, put up² your fists."

I closed the doors, and again advanced towards Bartleby. I felt additional incentives tempting me to my fate. I burned to be rebelled against again. I remembered that Bartleby never left the office.

"Bartleby," said I, "Ginger Nut is away; just step around to the Post Office, won't you? (it was but a three minutes' walk), and see if there is anything for me."

"I would prefer not to."

"You *will* not?"

"I *prefer* not."

I staggered to my desk, and sat there in a deep study. My blind inveteracy³ returned. Was there any other thing in which I could procure myself to be ignominiously repulsed by this lean, penniless wight?⁴—my hired clerk? What added thing is there, perfectly reasonable, that he will be sure to refuse to do?

¹ *pugilistic* Ready-to-fight.

² *put up* Put away.

³ *inveteracy* Hostility.

⁴ *wight* Person, but can also be used to refer to a ghost.

"Bartleby!"

No answer.

"Bartleby," in a louder tone.

No answer.

"Bartleby," I roared.

Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation, at the third summons, he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage.

"Go to the next room, and tell Nippers to come to me."

"I prefer not to," he respectfully and slowly said, and mildly disappeared.

"Very good, Bartleby," said I, in a quiet sort of serenely-severe self-possessed tone, intimating the unalterable purpose of some terrible retribution very close at hand. At the moment I half intended something of the kind. But upon the whole, as it was drawing towards my dinner-hour, I thought it best to put on my hat and walk home for the day, suffering much from perplexity and distress of mind.

Shall I acknowledge it? The conclusion of this whole business was, that it soon became a fixed fact of my chambers, that a pale young scrivener, by the name of Bartleby, had a desk there; that he copied for me at the usual rate of four cents a folio (one hundred words); but he was permanently exempt from examining the work done by him, that duty being transferred to Turkey and Nippers, out of compliment, doubtless, to their superior acuteness; moreover, said Bartleby was never, on any account, to be dispatched on the most trivial errand of any sort; and that even if entreated to take upon him such a matter, it was generally understood that he would "prefer not to"—in other words, that he would refuse point-blank.

As days passed on, I became considerably reconciled to Bartleby. His steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry (except when he chose to throw himself into a standing reverie behind his screen), his great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances, made him a valuable acquisition. One prime thing was this—*he was always there*—first in the morning, continually through the day, and the last at night. I had a singular confidence in his honesty. I felt my most precious papers perfectly safe in his hands. Sometimes, to be sure, I could not, for the very soul of me, avoid falling

into sudden spasmodic passions with him. For it was exceeding difficult to bear in mind all the time those strange peculiarities, privileges, and unheard of exemptions, forming the tacit stipulations on Bartleby's part under which he remained in my office. Now and then, in the eagerness of dispatching pressing business, I would inadvertently summon Bartleby, in a short, rapid tone, to put his finger, say, on the incipient tie of a bit of red tape¹ with which I was about compressing some papers. Of course, from behind the screen the usual answer, "I prefer not to," was sure to come; and then, how could a human creature, with the common infirmities of our nature, refrain from bitterly exclaiming upon such perverseness—such unreasonableness. However, every added repulse of this sort which I received only tended to lessen the probability of my repeating the inadvertence.

Here it must be said, that according to the custom of most legal gentlemen occupying chambers in densely-populated law buildings, there were several keys to my door. One was kept by a woman residing in the attic, which person weekly scrubbed and daily swept and dusted my apartments. Another was kept by Turkey for convenience sake. The third I sometimes carried in my own pocket. The fourth I knew not who had.

Now, one Sunday morning I happened to go to Trinity Church,² to hear a celebrated preacher, and finding myself rather early on the ground I thought I would walk round to my chambers for a while. Luckily I had my key with me; but upon applying it to the lock, I found it resisted by something inserted from the inside. Quite surprised, I called out; when to my consternation a key was turned from within; and thrusting his lean visage at me, and holding the door ajar, the apparition of Bartleby appeared, in his shirt sleeves, and otherwise in a strangely tattered dishabille,³ saying quietly that he was sorry, but he was deeply engaged just then, and—preferred not admitting me at present. In a brief word or two, he moreover added, that perhaps I had better walk round the block two or three

times, and by that time he would probably have concluded his affairs.

Now, the utterly unsurmised⁴ appearance of Bartleby, tenanting my law-chambers of a Sunday morning, with his cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*, yet withal firm and self-possessed, had such a strange effect upon me, that incontinently⁵ I slunk away from my own door, and did as desired. But not without sundry twinges of impotent rebellion against the mild effrontery of this unaccountable scrivener. Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me as it were. For I consider that one, for the time, is a sort of unmanned when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises. Furthermore, I was full of uneasiness as to what Bartleby could possibly be doing in my office in his shirt sleeves, and in an otherwise dismantled condition of a Sunday morning. Was anything amiss going on? Nay, that was out of the question. It was not to be thought of for a moment that Bartleby was an immoral person. But what could he be doing there?—copying? Nay again, whatever might be his eccentricities, Bartleby was an eminently decorous person. He would be the last man to sit down to his desk in any state approaching to nudity. Besides, it was Sunday; and there was something about Bartleby that forbade the supposition that he would by any secular occupation violate the proprieties of the day.⁶

Nevertheless, my mind was not pacified; and full of a restless curiosity, at last I returned to the door. Without hindrance I inserted my key, opened it, and entered. Bartleby was not to be seen. I looked round anxiously, peeped behind his screen; but it was very plain that he was gone. Upon more closely examining the place, I surmised that for an indefinite period Bartleby must have ate, dressed, and slept in my office, and that, too without plate, mirror, or bed. The cushioned seat of a rickety old sofa in one corner bore the faint impress of a lean, reclining form. Rolled away under his desk, I found a blanket; under the empty grate, a blacking

¹ *put his finger ... red tape* The speaker is tying up legal documents in the typical red or pink tape that was customarily used for such purposes.

² *Trinity Church* Episcopal church near Wall Street that catered to wealthy and money-minded New Yorkers.

³ *dishabille* Disheveled style of dress.

⁴ *unsurmised* Unimagined, unexpected.

⁵ *incontinently* Lacking in resolution.

⁶ *proprieties of the day* Nineteenth-century American Protestants, following the Puritan tradition, treated Sunday (the Sabbath) as a day of rest, when no secular work could take place.

box¹ and brush; on a chair, a tin basin, with soap and a ragged towel; in a newspaper a few crumbs of ginger-nuts and a morsel of cheese. Yes, thought I, it is evident enough that Bartleby has been making his home here, keeping bachelor's hall all by himself. Immediately then the thought came sweeping across me, what miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible! Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall-street is deserted as Petra;² and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building, too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy, and all through Sunday is forlorn. And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator, of a solitude which he has seen all populous—a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!³

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not displeasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam.⁴ I remembered the bright silks and sparkling faces I had seen that day, in gala trim, swan-like sailing down the Mississippi of Broadway; and I contrasted them with the pallid copyist, and thought to myself, Ah, happiness courts the light, so we deem the world is gay; but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none. These sad fancyings—chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain—led on to other and more special thoughts, concerning the eccentricities of Bartleby. Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered round me. The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet.⁵

¹ *blacking box* Box containing shoe polish.

² *Petra* Deserted city in what is now Jordan.

³ *Marius ... Carthage* When Roman general Gaius Marius was exiled in 88 CE, he went to Carthage (which had been destroyed by Rome in the Punic Wars, between 264–146 BCE). There is a well-known Neoclassical painting of Marius “brooding” in Carthage by Dutch-American painter John Vanderlyn, entitled “Marius Amid the Ruins of Carthage” (1808).

⁴ *sons of Adam* I.e., human beings, sharing the fate of Adam, who, in the book of Genesis, eats from the tree of knowledge and is punished with loss of paradise, a life of toil, and mortality.

⁵ *winding sheet* Burial shroud.

Suddenly I was attracted by Bartleby's closed desk, the key in open sight left in the lock.

I mean no mischief, seek the gratification of no heartless curiosity, thought I; besides, the desk is mine, and its contents, too, so I will make bold to look within. Everything was methodically arranged, the papers smoothly placed. The pigeon holes were deep, and removing the files of documents, I groped into their recesses. Presently I felt something there, and dragged it out. It was an old bandanna handkerchief, heavy and knotted. I opened it, and saw it was a savings' bank.

I now recalled all the quiet mysteries which I had noted in the man. I remembered that he never spoke but to answer; that, though at intervals he had considerable time to himself, yet I had never seen him reading—no, not even a newspaper; that for long periods he would stand looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall; I was quite sure he never visited any refectory⁶ or eating house; while his pale face clearly indicated that he never drank beer like Turkey, or tea and coffee even, like other men; that he never went anywhere in particular that I could learn; never went out for a walk, unless, indeed, that was the case at present; that he had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world; that though so thin and pale, he never complained of ill health. And more than all, I remembered a certain unconscious air of pallid—how shall I call it?—of pallid haughtiness, say, or rather an austere reserve about him, which had positively awed me into my tame compliance with his eccentricities, when I had feared to ask him to do the slightest incidental thing for me, even though I might know, from his long-continued motionlessness, that behind his screen he must be standing in one of those dead-wall reveries of his.

Revolving all these things, and coupling them with the recently discovered fact, that he made my office his constant abiding place and home, and not forgetful of his morbid moodiness; revolving all these things, a prudential feeling began to steal over me. My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into

⁶ *refectory* Communal dining hall.

repulsion. So true it is, and so terrible, too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms¹ to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach.

I did not accomplish the purpose of going to Trinity Church that morning. Somehow, the things I had seen disqualified me for the time from church-going. I walked homeward, thinking what I would do with Bartleby. Finally, I resolved upon this—I would put certain calm questions to him the next morning, touching his history, etc., and if he declined to answer them openly and unreservedly (and I supposed he would prefer not), then to give him a twenty dollar bill over and above whatever I might owe him, and tell him his services were no longer required; but that if in any other way I could assist him, I would be happy to do so, especially if he desired to return to his native place, wherever that might be, I would willingly help to defray the expenses. Moreover, if, after reaching home, he found himself at any time in want of aid, a letter from him would be sure of a reply.

The next morning came.

“Bartleby,” said I, gently calling to him behind his screen.

No reply.

“Bartleby,” said I, in a still gentler tone, “come here; I am not going to ask you to do anything you would prefer not to do—I simply wish to speak to you.”

Upon this he noiselessly slid into view.

“Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?”

“I would prefer not to.”

“Will you tell me *anything* about yourself?”

“I would prefer not to.”

“But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you.”

He did not look at me while I spoke, but kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero, which, as I then sat, was directly behind me, some six inches above my head.

“What is your answer, Bartleby,” said I, after waiting a considerable time for a reply, during which his countenance remained immovable, only there was the faintest conceivable tremor of the white attenuated mouth.

“At present I prefer to give no answer,” he said, and retired into his hermitage.

It was rather weak in me I confess, but his manner, on this occasion, nettled me. Not only did there seem to lurk in it a certain calm disdain, but his perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me.

Again I sat ruminating what I should do. Mortified as I was at his behavior, and resolved as I had been to dismiss him when I entered my office, nevertheless I strangely felt something superstitious knocking at my heart, and forbidding me to carry out my purpose, and denouncing me for a villain if I dared to breathe one bitter word against this forlornest of mankind. At last, familiarly drawing my chair behind his screen, I sat down and said: “Bartleby, never mind, then, about revealing your history; but let me entreat you, as a friend, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office. Say now, you will help to examine papers to-morrow or next day: in short, say now, that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable—say so, Bartleby.”

“At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,” was his mildly cadaverous reply.

Just then the folding-doors opened, and Nippers approached. He seemed suffering from an unusually bad night’s rest, induced by severer indigestion than common. He overheard those final words of Bartleby.

“*Prefer not*, eh?” gritted Nippers—“I’d *prefer* him, if I were you, sir,” addressing me—“I’d *prefer* him; I’d give him preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he *prefers* not to do now?”

Bartleby moved not a limb.

“Mr. Nippers,” said I, “I’d prefer that you would withdraw for the present.”

¹ *give alms* Offer charity.

Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? This apprehension had not been without efficacy in determining me to summary¹ measures.

As Nippers, looking very sour and sulky, was departing, Turkey blandly and deferentially approached.

“With submission, sir,” said he, “yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him, and enabling him to assist in examining his papers.”

“So you have got the word, too,” said I, slightly excited.

“With submission, what word, sir,” asked Turkey, respectfully crowding himself into the contracted space behind the screen, and by so doing, making me jostle the scrivener. “What word, sir?”

“I would prefer to be left alone here,” said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy.

“*That’s* the word, Turkey,” said I—“*that’s* it.”

“Oh, *prefer*? oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer—”

“Turkey,” interrupted I, “you will please withdraw.”

“Oh certainly, sir, if you prefer that I should.”

As he opened the folding-door to retire, Nippers at his desk caught a glimpse of me, and asked whether I would prefer to have a certain paper copied on blue paper or white. He did not in the least roguishly accent the word prefer. It was plain that it involuntarily rolled from his tongue. I thought to myself, surely I must get rid of a demented man, who already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks. But I thought it prudent not to break the dismissal² at once.

The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery. Upon asking him why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing no more writing.

“Why, how now? what next?” exclaimed I, “do no more writing?”

“No more.”

“And what is the reason?”

“Do you not see the reason for yourself,” he indifferently replied.

I looked steadfastly at him, and perceived that his eyes looked dull and glazed. Instantly it occurred to me, that his unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have temporarily impaired his vision.

I was touched. I said something in condolence with him. I hinted that of course he did wisely in abstaining from writing for a while; and urged him to embrace that opportunity of taking wholesome exercise in the open air. This, however, he did not do. A few days after this, my other clerks being absent, and being in a great hurry to dispatch certain letters by the mail, I thought that, having nothing else earthly to do, Bartleby would surely be less inflexible than usual, and carry these letters to the post-office. But he blankly declined. So, much to my inconvenience, I went myself.

Still added days went by. Whether Bartleby’s eyes improved or not, I could not say. To all appearance, I thought they did. But when I asked him if they did, he vouchsafed no answer. At all events, he would do no copying. At last, in reply to my urgings, he informed me that he had permanently given up copying.

“What!” exclaimed I; “suppose your eyes should get entirely well—better than ever before—would you not copy then?”

“I have given up copying,” he answered, and slid aside.

He remained as ever, a fixture in my chamber. Nay—if that were possible—he became still more of a fixture than before. What was to be done? He would do nothing in the office; why should he stay there? In plain fact, he had now become a millstone³ to me, not only useless as a necklace, but afflictive to bear. Yet I was sorry for him. I speak less than truth when I say that, on his own account, he occasioned me uneasiness. If he would but have named a single relative or friend, I would instantly have written, and urged

¹ *summary* Quick and determined.

² *dismissal* Dismissal.

³ *millstone* Heavy stone used to grind corn; a “millstone around one’s neck” is a common saying, meaning that one is burdened by a heavy problem.

their taking the poor fellow away to some convenient retreat. But he seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic. At length, necessities connected with my business tyrannized over all other considerations. Decently as I could, I told Bartleby that in six days time he must unconditionally leave the office. I warned him to take measures, in the interval, for procuring some other abode. I offered to assist him in this endeavor, if he himself would but take the first step towards a removal. "And when you finally quit me, Bartleby," added I, "I shall see that you go not away entirely unprovided. Six days from this hour, remember."

At the expiration of that period, I peeped behind the screen, and lo! Bartleby was there.

I buttoned up my coat, balanced myself; advanced slowly towards him, touched his shoulder, and said, "The time has come; you must quit this place; I am sorry for you; here is money; but you must go."

"I would prefer not," he replied, with his back still towards me.

"You *must*."

He remained silent.

Now I had an unbounded confidence in this man's common honesty. He had frequently restored to me sixpences and shillings carelessly dropped upon the floor, for I am apt to be very reckless in such shirt-button affairs.¹ The proceeding, then, which followed will not be deemed extraordinary.

"Bartleby," said I, "I owe you twelve dollars on account; here are thirty-two; the odd twenty are yours—Will you take it?" and I handed the bills towards him.

But he made no motion.

"I will leave them here, then," putting them under a weight on the table. Then taking my hat and cane and going to the door, I tranquilly turned and added—"After you have removed your things from these offices, Bartleby, you will of course lock the door—since everyone is now gone for the day but you—and if you please, slip your key underneath the mat, so that I may have it in the morning. I shall not see you again; so good-by to you. If, hereafter, in your new place of abode, I can be of any service to you, do not fail to advise me by letter. Good-by, Bartleby, and fare you well."

¹ *reckless ... affairs* I.e., careless about such small things.

But he answered not a word; like the last column of some ruined temple, he remained standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room.

As I walked home in a pensive mood, my vanity got the better of my pity. I could not but highly plume² myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby. Masterly I call it, and such it must appear to any dispassionate thinker. The beauty of my procedure seemed to consist in its perfect quietness. There was no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric³ hectoring, and striding to and fro across the apartment, jerking out vehement commands for Bartleby to bundle himself off with his beggarly traps.⁴ Nothing of the kind. Without loudly bidding Bartleby depart—as an inferior genius might have done—I *assumed* the ground that depart he must; and upon that assumption built all I had to say. The more I thought over my procedure, the more I was charmed with it. Nevertheless, next morning, upon awakening, I had my doubts—I had somehow slept off the fumes of vanity. One of the coolest and wisest hours a man has, is just after he awakes in the morning. My procedure seemed as sagacious as ever—but only in theory. How it would prove in practice—there was the rub.⁵ It was truly a beautiful thought to have assumed Bartleby's departure; but, after all, that assumption was simply my own, and none of Bartleby's. The great point was, not whether I had assumed that he would quit me, but whether he would prefer so to do. He was more a man of preferences than assumptions.

After breakfast, I walked down town, arguing the probabilities *pro* and *con*. One moment I thought it would prove a miserable failure, and Bartleby would be found all alive at my office as usual; the next moment it seemed certain that I should find his chair empty. And so I kept veering about. At the corner of Broadway and Canal street, I saw quite an excited group of people standing in earnest conversation.

² *plume* Congratulate.

³ *choleric* Angry.

⁴ *traps* Belongings.

⁵ *there was the rub* See Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1609) Act 3, Scene 1, where Hamlet considers what might follow after death: "To die, To sleep; / To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub, / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, / Must give us pause" (65–69).

"I'll take odds he doesn't," said a voice as I passed.

"Doesn't go?—done!" said I, "put up your money."

I was instinctively putting my hand in my pocket to produce my own, when I remembered that this was an election day. The words I had overheard bore no reference to Bartleby, but to the success or non-success of some candidate for the mayoralty. In my intent frame of mind, I had, as it were, imagined that all Broadway shared in my excitement, and were debating the same question with me. I passed on, very thankful that the uproar of the street screened my momentary absent-mindedness.

As I had intended, I was earlier than usual at my office door. I stood listening for a moment. All was still. He must be gone. I tried the knob. The door was locked. Yes, my procedure had worked to a charm; he indeed must be vanished. Yet a certain melancholy mixed with this: I was almost sorry for my brilliant success. I was fumbling under the door mat for the key, which Bartleby was to have left there for me, when accidentally my knee knocked against a panel, producing a summoning sound, and in response a voice came to me from within—"Not yet; I am occupied."

It was Bartleby.

I was thunderstruck. For an instant I stood like the man who, pipe in mouth, was killed one cloudless afternoon long ago in Virginia, by summer lightning; at his own warm open window he was killed, and remained leaning out there upon the dreamy afternoon till someone touched him, when he fell.

"Not gone!" I murmured at last. But again obeying that wondrous ascendancy which the inscrutable scrivener had over me, and from which ascendancy, for all my chafing, I could not completely escape, I slowly went down stairs and out into the street, and while walking round the block, considered what I should next do in this unheard-of perplexity. Turn the man out by an actual thrusting I could not; to drive him away by calling him hard names would not do; calling in the police was an unpleasant idea; and yet, permit him to enjoy his cadaverous triumph over me—this, too, I could not think of. What was to be done? or, if nothing could be done, was there anything further that I could *assume* in the matter? Yes, as before I had prospectively assumed that Bartleby would depart, so now I might retrospectively assume that departed he

was. In the legitimate carrying out of this assumption, I might enter my office in a great hurry, and pretending not to see Bartleby at all, walk straight against him as if he were air. Such a proceeding would in a singular degree have the appearance of a home-thrust.¹ It was hardly possible that Bartleby could withstand such an application of the doctrine of assumptions. But upon second thoughts the success of the plan seemed rather dubious. I resolved to argue the matter over with him again.

"Bartleby," said I, entering the office, with a quietly severe expression, "I am seriously displeased. I am pained, Bartleby. I had thought better of you. I had imagined you of such a gentlemanly organization, that in any delicate dilemma a slight hint would suffice—in short, an assumption. But it appears I am deceived. Why," I added, unaffectedly starting, "you have not even touched that money yet," pointing to it, just where I had left it the evening previous.

He answered nothing.

"Will you, or will you not, quit me?" I now demanded in a sudden passion, advancing close to him.

"I would prefer *not* to quit you," he replied gently emphasizing the *not*.

"What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?"

He answered nothing.

"Are you ready to go on and write now? Are your eyes recovered? Could you copy a small paper for me this morning? or help examine a few lines? or step round to the post-office? In a word, will you do anything at all, to give a coloring to your refusal to depart the premises?"

He silently retired into his hermitage.

I was now in such a state of nervous resentment that I thought it but prudent to check myself at present from further demonstrations. Bartleby and I were alone. I remembered the tragedy of the unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt in the solitary office of the latter; and how poor Colt, being dreadfully incensed by Adams, and imprudently permitting himself to get wildly excited, was at unawares hurried into his fatal act—an act which certainly no

¹ *home-thrust* I.e., move that strikes home (hits its target).

man could possibly deplore more than the actor himself.¹ Often it had occurred to me in my ponderings upon the subject, that had that altercation taken place in the public street, or at a private residence, it would not have terminated as it did. It was the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, upstairs, of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations—an uncarpeted office, doubtless, of a dusty, haggard sort of appearance—this it must have been, which greatly helped to enhance the irritable desperation of the hapless Colt.

But when this old Adam² of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him. How? Why, simply by recalling the divine injunction: “A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.”³ Yes, this it was that saved me. Aside from higher considerations, charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor. Men have committed murder for jealousy’s sake, and anger’s sake, and hatred’s sake, and selfishness’ sake, and spiritual pride’s sake; but no man, that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity’s sake. Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should, especially with high-tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy. At any rate, upon the occasion in question, I strove to drown my exasperated feelings towards the scrivener by benevolently construing his conduct.—Poor fellow, poor fellow! thought I, he don’t mean anything; and besides, he has seen hard times, and ought to be indulged.

I endeavored, also, immediately to occupy myself, and at the same time to comfort my despondency. I tried to fancy, that in the course of the morning, at such time as might prove agreeable to him, Bartleby, of his own free accord, would emerge from his hermitage and take up some decided line of march in the

direction of the door. But no. Half-past twelve o’clock came; Turkey began to glow in the face, overturn his inkstand, and become generally obstreperous; Nippers abated down into quietude and courtesy; Ginger Nut munched his noon apple; and Bartleby remained standing at his window in one of his profoundest dead-wall reveries. Will it be credited? Ought I to acknowledge it? That afternoon I left the office without saying one further word to him.

Some days now passed, during which, at leisure intervals I looked a little into “Edwards on the Will,” and “Priestley on Necessity.”⁴ Under the circumstances, those books induced a salutary feeling. Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestinated⁵ from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted⁶ upon me for some mysterious purpose of an allwise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom. Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I; I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs; in short, I never feel so private as when I know you are here. At last I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content. Others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain.

I believe that this wise and blessed frame of mind would have continued with me, had it not been for the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks obtruded upon me by my professional friends who visited the rooms. But thus it often is, that the constant friction of illiberal minds wears out at last the best resolves of the more generous. Though to be sure, when I reflected upon it, it was not strange that people entering my office should be struck by the peculiar aspect of the unaccountable Bartleby, and so be tempted to throw out some sinister

¹ *tragedy ... himself* The story that the lawyer alludes to here is one of the more infamous murder cases in New York City. John Caldwell Colt (1810–42), brother of the firearms inventor Samuel Colt (1814–62), murdered a printer named Samuel Adams with a hatchet, covered up the crime, and died by suicide on the day he was scheduled to be executed.

² *Adam* I.e., sin, human weakness. Adam, as the original sinner, stands here for the sinful tendencies of all humanity.

³ *A new ... another* See John 13:34; these words are spoken by Christ to his disciples after the Last Supper.

⁴ *Edwards on the Will* Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* (1754) argues that human will is depraved, and that humanity is consequently reliant on God’s grace for salvation; *Priestley on Necessity* Joseph Priestley was an eminent English materialist philosopher. In his *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity* (1777) he denies the reality of both the soul and free will.

⁵ *predestinated* Edwards was a vigorous proponent of the doctrine of predestination: that God predestined people to salvation or damnation without reference to their own works.

⁶ *billeted* Lodged.

observations concerning him. Sometimes an attorney, having business with me, and calling at my office, and finding no one but the scrivener there, would undertake to obtain some sort of precise information from him touching my whereabouts; but without heeding his idle talk, Bartleby would remain standing immovable in the middle of the room. So after contemplating him in that position for a time, the attorney would depart, no wiser than he came.

Also, when a reference¹ was going on, and the room full of lawyers and witnesses, and business driving fast, some deeply-occupied legal gentleman present, seeing Bartleby wholly unemployed, would request him to run round to his (the legal gentleman's) office and fetch some papers for him. Thereupon, Bartleby would tranquilly decline, and yet remain idle as before. Then the lawyer would give a great stare, and turn to me. And what could I say? At last I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was running round, having reference to the strange creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much. And as the idea came upon me of his possibly turning out a long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional reputation; and casting a general gloom over the premises; keeping soul and body together to the last upon his savings (for doubtless he spent but half a dime a day), and in the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy: as all these dark anticipations crowded upon me more and more, and my friends continually intruded their relentless remarks upon the apparition in my room; a great change was wrought in me. I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and forever rid me of this intolerable incubus.²

Ere revolving any complicated project, however, adapted to this end, I first simply suggested to Bartleby the propriety of his permanent departure. In a calm and serious tone, I commanded the idea to his careful and mature consideration. But, having taken three days to meditate upon it, he apprised me, that his original

determination remained the same; in short, that he still preferred to abide with me.

What shall I do? I now said to myself, buttoning up my coat to the last button. What shall I do? what ought I to do? what does conscience say I *should* do with this man, or, rather, ghost. Rid myself of him, I must; go, he shall. But how? You will not thrust him, the poor, pale, passive mortal—you will not thrust such a helpless creature out of your door? you will not dishonor yourself by such cruelty? No, I will not, I cannot do that. Rather would I let him live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall.³ What, then, will you do? For all your coaxing, he will not budge. Bribes he leaves under your own paper-weight on your table; in short, it is quite plain that he prefers to cling to you.

Then something severe, something unusual must be done. What! surely you will not have him collared by a constable, and commit his innocent pallor to the common jail? And upon what ground could you procure such a thing to be done?—a vagrant, is he? What! he a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? It is because he will *not* be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him *as* a vagrant. That is too absurd. No visible means of support: there I have him. Wrong again: for indubitably he *does* support himself, and that is the only unanswerable proof that any man can show of his possessing the means so to do. No more, then. Since he will not quit me, I must quit him. I will change my offices; I will move elsewhere, and give him fair notice, that if I find him on my new premises I will then proceed against him as a common trespasser.

Acting accordingly, next day I thus addressed him: "I find these chambers too far from the City Hall; the air is unwholesome. In a word, I propose to remove my offices next week, and shall no longer require your services. I tell you this now, in order that you may seek another place."

He made no reply, and nothing more was said.

On the appointed day I engaged carts and men, proceeded to my chambers, and, having but little furniture, everything was removed in a few hours. Throughout, the scrivener remained standing behind the screen, which I directed to be removed the last thing. It was

¹ *reference* Meeting to resolve a legal matter or dispute.

² *incubus* Demon who has sexual intercourse with sleeping victims, usually women; it can also mean "nightmare," and is often used to describe an oppressive or parasitic person.

³ *mason up ... wall* In Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), the murderer buries his victim alive by immurement (bricking him up behind a wall).

withdrawn; and, being folded up like a huge folio, left him the motionless occupant of a naked room. I stood in the entry watching him a moment, while something from within me upbraided me.

I re-entered, with my hand in my pocket—and—and my heart in my mouth.

“Good-by, Bartleby; I am going—good-by, and God some way bless you; and take that,” slipping something in his hand. But it dropped upon the floor, and then—strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of.

Established in my new quarters, for a day or two I kept the door locked, and started at every footfall in the passages. When I returned to my rooms, after any little absence, I would pause at the threshold for an instant, and attentively listen, ere applying my key. But these fears were needless. Bartleby never came nigh me.

I thought all was going well, when a perturbed-looking stranger visited me, inquiring whether I was the person who had recently occupied rooms at No. — Wall street.

Full of forebodings, I replied that I was.

“Then, sir,” said the stranger, who proved a lawyer, “you are responsible for the man you left there. He refuses to do any copying; he refuses to do anything; he says he prefers not to; and he refuses to quit the premises.”

“I am very sorry, sir,” said I, with assumed tranquility, but an inward tremor, “but, really, the man you allude to is nothing to me—he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him.”

“In mercy’s name, who is he?”

“I certainly cannot inform you. I know nothing about him. Formerly I employed him as a copyist; but he has done nothing for me now for some time past.”

“I shall settle him, then—good morning, sir.”

Several days passed, and I heard nothing more; and, though I often felt a charitable prompting to call at the place and see poor Bartleby, yet a certain squeamishness, of I know not what, withheld me.

All is over with him, by this time, thought I, at last, when, through another week, no further intelligence reached me. But, coming to my room the day after, I found several persons waiting at my door in a high state of nervous excitement.

“That’s the man—here he comes,” cried the foremost one, whom I recognized as the lawyer who had previously called upon me alone.

“You must take him away, sir, at once,” cried a portly person among them, advancing upon me, and whom I knew to be the landlord of No. — Wall street. “These gentlemen, my tenants, cannot stand it any longer; Mr. B——,” pointing to the lawyer, “has turned him out of his room, and he now persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night. Everybody is concerned; clients are leaving the offices; some fears are entertained of a mob; something you must do, and that without delay.”

Aghast at this torrent, I fell back before it, and would fain have locked myself in my new quarters. In vain I persisted that Bartleby was nothing to me—no more than to anyone else. In vain—I was the last person known to have anything to do with him, and they held me to the terrible account. Fearful, then, of being exposed in the papers (as one person present obscurely threatened), I considered the matter, and, at length, said, that if the lawyer would give me a confidential interview with the scrivener, in his (the lawyer’s) own room, I would, that afternoon, strive my best to rid them of the nuisance they complained of.

Going up stairs to my old haunt, there was Bartleby silently sitting upon the banister at the landing.

“What are you doing here, Bartleby?” said I.

“Sitting upon the banister,” he mildly replied.

I motioned him into the lawyer’s room, who then left us.

“Bartleby” said I, “are you aware that you are the cause of great tribulation to me, by persisting in occupying the entry after being dismissed from the office?”

No answer.

“Now one of two things must take place. Either you must do something, or something must be done to you. Now what sort of business would you like to engage in? Would you like to re-engage in copying for some one?”

“No; I would prefer not to make any change.”

“Would you like a clerkship in a dry-goods store?”

“There is too much confinement about that. No, I would not like a clerkship; but I am not particular.”

“Too much confinement,” I cried, “why you keep yourself confined all the time!”

“I would prefer not to take a clerkship,” he rejoined, as if to settle that little item at once.

“How would a bar-tender’s business suit you? There is no trying of the eye-sight in that.”

“I would not like it at all; though, as I said before, I am not particular.”

His unworded wordiness inspirited me. I returned to the charge.

“Well, then, would you like to travel through the country collecting bills for the merchants? That would improve your health.”

“No, I would prefer to be doing something else.”

“How, then, would going as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation—how would that suit you?”

“Not at all. It does not strike me that there is anything definite about that. I like to be stationary. But I am not particular.”

“Stationary you shall be, then,” I cried, now losing all patience, and, for the first time in all my exasperating connection with him, fairly flying into a passion. “If you do not go away from these premises before night, I shall feel bound—indeed, I *am* bound—to—to—to quit the premises myself!” I rather absurdly concluded, knowing not with what possible threat to try to frighten his immobility into compliance. Despairing of all further efforts, I was precipitately leaving him, when a final thought occurred to me—one which had not been wholly unindulged before.

“Bartleby,” said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, “will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away.”

“No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all.”

I answered nothing; but, effectually dodging every one by the suddenness and rapidity of my flight, rushed from the building, ran up Wall street towards Broadway, and, jumping into the first omnibus, was soon removed from pursuit. As soon as tranquility returned, I distinctly perceived that I had now done all that I possibly could, both in respect to the demands

of the landlord and his tenants, and with regard to my own desire and sense of duty, to benefit Bartleby, and shield him from rude persecution, I now strove to be entirely care-free and quiescent; and my conscience justified me in the attempt; though, indeed, it was not so successful as I could have wished. So fearful was I of being again hunted out by the incensed landlord and his exasperated tenants, that, surrendering my business to Nippers, for a few days, I drove about the upper part of the town and through the suburbs, in my rockaway;¹ crossed over to Jersey City and Hoboken, and paid fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria.² In fact, I almost lived in my rockaway for the time.

When again I entered my office, lo, a note from the landlord lay upon the desk. I opened it with trembling hands. It informed me that the writer had sent to the police, and had Bartleby removed to the Tombs as a vagrant. Moreover, since I knew more about him than anyone else, he wished me to appear at that place, and make a suitable statement of the facts. These tidings had a conflicting effect upon me. At first I was indignant; but, at last, almost approved. The landlord’s energetic, summary disposition, had led him to adopt a procedure which I do not think I would have decided upon myself; and yet, as a last resort, under such peculiar circumstances, it seemed the only plan.

As I afterwards learned, the poor scrivener, when told that he must be conducted to the Tombs, offered not the slightest obstacle, but, in his pale, unmoving way, silently acquiesced.

Some of the compassionate and curious bystanders joined the party; and headed by one of the constables arm in arm with Bartleby, the silent procession filed its way through all the noise, and heat, and joy of the roaring thoroughfares at noon.

The same day I received the note, I went to the Tombs, or, to speak more properly, the Halls of Justice. Seeking the right officer, I stated the purpose of my call, and was informed that the individual I described was, indeed, within. I then assured the functionary that Bartleby was a perfectly honest man, and greatly

¹ *rockaway* Carriage.

² *Jersey City ... Hoboken* Cities in New Jersey, both located on the Hudson River; *Manhattanville* Neighborhood in Manhattan, also called West Harlem; *Astoria* Neighborhood in the borough of Queens, New York.

to be compassionated, however unaccountably eccentric. I narrated all I knew and closed by suggesting the idea of letting him remain in as indulgent confinement as possible, till something less harsh might be done—though, indeed, I hardly knew what. At all events, if nothing else could be decided upon, the alms-house¹ must receive him. I then begged to have an interview.

Being under no disgraceful charge, and quite serene and harmless in all his ways, they had permitted him freely to wander about the prison, and, especially, in the inclosed grass-platted yards thereof. And so I found him there, standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves.

“Bartleby!”

“I know you,” he said, without looking round—“and I want nothing to say to you.”

“It was not I that brought you here, Bartleby,” said I, keenly pained at his implied suspicion. “And to you, this should not be so vile a place. Nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass.”

“I know where I am,” he replied, but would say nothing more, and so I left him.

As I entered the corridor again, a broad meat-like man, in an apron, accosted me, and, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, said—“Is that your friend?”

“Yes.”

“Does he want to starve? If he does, let him live on the prison fare, that’s all.”

“Who are you?” asked I, not knowing what to make of such an unofficially speaking person in such a place.

“I am the grub-man. Such gentlemen as have friends here, hire me to provide them with something good to eat.”

“Is this so?” said I, turning to the turnkey.

He said it was.

“Well, then,” said I, slipping some silver into the grub-man’s hands (for so they called him), “I want you to give particular attention to my friend there; let him

have the best dinner you can get. And you must be as polite to him as possible.”

“Introduce me, will you?” said the grub-man, looking at me with an expression which seem to say he was all impatience for an opportunity to give a specimen of his breeding.

Thinking it would prove of benefit to the scrivener, I acquiesced; and, asking the grub-man his name, went up with him to Bartleby.

“Bartleby, this is a friend; you will find him very useful to you.”

“Your sarvant, sir, your sarvant,” said the grub-man, making a low salutation behind his apron. “Hope you find it pleasant here, sir; nice grounds—cool apartments—hope you’ll stay with us some time—try to make it agreeable. What will you have for dinner to-day?”

“I prefer not to dine to-day,” said Bartleby, turning away. “It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners.” So saying, he slowly moved to the other side of the inclosure, and took up a position fronting the dead-wall.

“How’s this?” said the grub-man, addressing me with a stare of astonishment. “He’s odd, ain’t he?”

“I think he is a little deranged,” said I, sadly.

“Deranged? deranged is it? Well, now, upon my word, I thought that friend of yours was a gentleman forger; they are always pale, and genteel-like, them forgers. I can’t help pity ’em—can’t help it, sir. Did you know Monroe Edwards?² he added, touchingly, and paused. Then, laying his hand piteously on my shoulder, sighed, “he died of consumption at Sing-Sing.³ So you weren’t acquainted with Monroe?”

“No, I was never socially acquainted with any forgers. But I cannot stop longer. Look to my friend yonder. You will not lose by it. I will see you again.”

Some few days after this, I again obtained admission to the Tombs, and went through the corridors in quest of Bartleby; but without finding him.

“I saw him coming from his cell not long ago,” said a turnkey, “may be he’s gone to loiter in the yards.”

So I went in that direction.

¹ *alms-house* Charitable house or building that offered shelter to the poor.

² *Monroe Edwards* Infamous slave trader and forger (1808–47) whose trial gained considerable prominence in the years preceding Melville’s writing of “Bartleby.”

³ *Sing-Sing* Prison in New York state.

“Are you looking for the silent man?” said another turnkey, passing me. “Yonder he lies—sleeping in the yard there. ’Tis not twenty minutes since I saw him lie down.”

The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung.

Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones, I saw the wasted Bartleby. But nothing stirred. I paused; then went close up to him; stooped over, and saw that his dim eyes were open; otherwise he seemed profoundly sleeping. Something prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet.

The round face of the grub-man peered upon me now. “His dinner is ready. Won’t he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?”

“Lives without dining,” said I, and closed the eyes.

“Eh!—He’s asleep, ain’t he?”

“With kings and counselors,”¹ murmured I.

* * * * *

There would seem little need for proceeding further in this history. Imagination will readily supply the meagre recital of poor Bartleby’s interment. But, ere parting with the reader, let me say, that if this little

narrative has sufficiently interested him, to awaken curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator’s making his acquaintance, I can only reply, that in such curiosity I fully share, but am wholly unable to gratify it. Yet here I hardly know whether I should divulge one little item of rumor, which came to my ear a few months after the scrivener’s decease. Upon what basis it rested, I could never ascertain; and hence, how true it is I cannot now tell. But, inasmuch as this vague report has not been without a certain suggestive interest to me, however sad, it may prove the same with some others; and so I will briefly mention it. The report was this: that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office² at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. When I think over this rumor, hardly can I express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a banknote sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers anymore; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

—1853

¹ *With kings and counselors* See the book of Job, Chapter 3, where Job curses the day he was born: “Why died I not from the womb? . . . For now should I have lain still and been quiet . . . / With kings and counsellors of the earth, who built desolate places for themselves” (3.11–14). The full chapter appears as an In Context section below.

² *Dead Letter Office* Place where undeliverable mail is stored and eventually destroyed.