

The Man Who Lived Amongst the Cannibals

by Robert Kloss

Seventy years later, Wilson “Stinky” Monroe, one of those assembled youths, explained Melville's early morning exercises:

“Compacted into his office, why our world was all of a sudden nothing but arms and legs, pits and asses, our youth and energy compressed into boys woven over boys, prickling & tickling one another with our various hairs, the stink of our armpits and other such sweaty extremities, you could scarce shift a wink for an ass in your face, & these boys with their flatulence, my oh, until the old man put an end to the games, of course; yes, er, anyhow, we hunkered under tables and over tables, wedged into windows, straddled atop bookshelves, until there we fit, breathing in the stagnant air, the old man at the fore, prodding us on, each of us, to read from some godforsaken text, why, he took daily dosages of the *NY Times* and the *Post*, Carlyle and Shakespeare; he begged us feed it to him like they were biscuits. Understand, he could hardly walk much less write until we had done so—” Asked to provide a demonstration the 83 year old responded as if those days had only just passed. Exact passages recalled as if dipping into some everlasting stream of remembrance. He began in one voice speaking of the rising tensions between North and South, “how long may the dignified South yet allow these transgressions against Her natural right?” and then in another he quoted of a nearby town concerning a visiting circus, “a most remarkable collection of Freaks and Oddities, possessing young men and girls surviving entirely on the saltwater passing through their Gills”, before transitioning into Carlyle on Cromwell, “Can a great soul be possible without a *conscience* in it, the essence of all *real* souls, great, or small?” finally shifting, with a fiendish tinge, into “The Moor is of a free and open nature/ that thinks men honest that but seem to be so;/ And will as

tenderly be led by th' nose/ as asses are." All of this, Monroe expressed, was performed simultaneously, and when doubled and tripled, overall fifty voices strong, became an incomprehensible cacophony to all involved, Melville included. Perhaps Melville *especially*. He sat, the while, at desk's edge, his brow most perplexedly furrowed, head cocked, his mouth half agape, "as if at any moment he would ask someone to repeat what they had just read" but never uttering such a word in all that long summer.

At conclusion of the exhibition Monroe sniffled, wiped his eyes, choked up, he said, "And that's how it all went."

"They slept," Pete Melville later wrote, "on the floor of my bedroom like a pack of licey rats. Licey, yes, we were all infested with their scurrying vermin."

Their figures outlined in the moonlight, "I could scarcely sleep for their retching and belching, that first night, one boy, apparently not housebroken, decided to move his bowels, there, amidst the rest. Even with the windows open most nights were unbearable, and there was little possibility of sleep. Factor in also their constant quarrels, the punching and cussing and biting—one urchin nearly took the ear off another while about a week into their stay several of these scamps dreadfully abused an anemic black haired fellow. You never saw such an assault—they covered his face with shaving soap and hiked his britches to his ears; that is, until the Brute [Melville himself] pulled them off."

Even if sleep visited, the boy Melville often woke with vagrant youths crowded about his figure, lying across his body, his legs, curled into balls at his feet. "Many nights I woke to some fetid monster drooling on me; I took great pleasure, such as it were, in thrashing them off, 'back onto the floor with you, Vermin!' They held on though wrapping their spindly arms about me as if for dear life. Some cried at the thought of returning to the floor—"

They also slept in the front room, the kitchen, the dining room (on the table and under the table), draped with burlap sacks or rags or Elizabeth's spare clothes, using their hands or books from

Pete's collection as pillows. They slept in any nook a boy could fit, with exception of Herman's office, and the Melville's bedroom, for, if the boys were allowed to sleep in their bedroom, Elizabeth vowed to "slash my throat & then Papa will forsake you Herman & you will have to write your books in debtor's prison."

Sundays were off so Melville could "see the family." Mostly he took walks with Elizabeth and little Pete. The boys meanwhile spent their free hours marauding nearby farms, stalking and killing chickens and impregnating milkmaids. "Melville's young men are becoming nigh well impossible," a nearby farmer wrote in his journal. "I've given up attending church. I say my prayers from the front stoop with a Winchester upon my lap."

"Oh Herman, dear, I hear them skittering about on the floorboards above & I can't do my housework. Why, I can hardly breathe for the fright."

Before the boys arrived, Elizabeth Melville developed a system of fixing Herman's lunch and leaving it outside his closed office door otherwise the writer neglected all sustenance. She knocked at the door until "Herman indicated he was suitably roused from his mania," and then, since under no circumstance was she to see her husband "disturbed by the salt air," Elizabeth immediately departed. Once, she disobeyed the insistence of her father, the man who so long distrusted his in-law. The advice had been poorly offered as Herman, eyes "flashing with lightening," dashed a vase just over her shoulder. Now, the boys entrenched, she was asked to keep from the second floor entirely; one of the boys was sent down each day for his lunch tray. "I always vacated the kitchen before the boy arrived. I hid in the pantry. Dashed across the yard to lurk around a tree. Waited in a coat closet with the door barely ajar, just to hear. Some days he lingered, fingering leftovers in the refrigerator, sticking his hand in the lemonade, stealing handfuls of sugar, you doubt me, why I found grains trailing from the kitchen to

the foot of the stairs. When older boys were sent they left off the food and came looking for me. I'd seen the sex-panic in their eyes often since they first arrived. Herman discouraged this thinking. How many nights I fell asleep weeping."

"I fear it's too much for me," Melville wrote his friend Hawthorne. "It struggles from my grasp."

"Each boy was assigned to a character or a chapter, either in our book or some other text, & no matter the obscurity the old man expected us to understand each reference, to either have the passage memorized or the text on hand, for recitation, & immediate application to the greater cloth of the masterpiece; so, perhaps, his eyes blazing and hair wild, the old man would command Tom, "You there, boy, *Macbeth*, act three, scene four, how does the man himself phrase his guilt?" If you did not know, the old man would strike you with a switch and if he had no switch he would ask the boy at your shoulder to fetch a switch from the willow out back. That boy would tramp off with exceptional speed; *he* figured out of adoration, but in truth we desired any opportunity to get away, if for a moment."

"I woke in the night, curled up on the cold boards, bound hand to foot. I tried screaming but they'd stuffed my mouth full of cloths. They whispered from the bed 'You'll see what it's like now Young Master.' Their eyes, dozens, peering over the sheets."

"How, how, can I hold her down, this sinewy beast, ever struggling free, & mightier than my grasp?"

"Each evening we sat at the table, Pete and I, candles dripping & all but expired, waiting for Herman, our meatloaf and asparagus cooling before us. They continued on, though, well into the night. By then, the boys often neglected to fetch his lunch, so Herman generally went his days without eating. Perhaps I should

have brought the tray myself, as I had prior to their arrival, but I was too fearful. I couldn't stand the thought of what he might—”

Nobody spoke, coughed, cleared a throat, so much as shifted, when Melville got to narrating. “We wrote and wrote only. Our palms and fingers as if we'd been tarred. In the evening we recited in unison and Melville listened for variations. He was like a little boy with a net waiting for butterflies.” He caught the best variations and added them to the main document. The worst he burned immediately. “If he had time he would send someone out for a switch & we'd spend the evening thrashing or being thrashed, depending where you fell.”

“Their hands all over me. Drooling too. On my neck.”

“Skittering on the floorboards. I try sleeping but their nails, their nails scratching, oh if only they wore shoes—”

“One day Melville announced Nat was to sail for London, immediately.” Melville remained unsure of several passages in *Sartor Resartus* and wished Nat to inquire of Carlyle in person of his intentions. “He was the best friend many of us had. Kept you warm at night, stuck up for you when the others were fierce. Nat alone at the edge of the dogcart, feet dangling over the side, his pale face and black eyes. Once the driver set the horses to a gallop, not but two minutes gone by, & a couple hundred yards of forest come between us and poor old Nat. Sitting alone in the center of the dogcart, he just got smaller and smaller until you couldn't see him at all.” The boys never again saw their friend. No record exists of a meeting between any such boy and Thomas Carlyle.

“Hold still Young Master' the ones on the floor whispered. 'So's we can be near you. Let us warm you Young Master.'”

“Mrs. Melville got to watching her programs with the volume quite loud. Anyhow, we heard clearly through the floorboards. Her “stories” she called them, & she was fond of the game shows, you could hear the audience cheering—Melville'd stomp & bellow & his eyes blazing like Moses smashing the commandments. Just things like whoever invented the television should be castrated & how ironic since he'd made his fortune exploiting island heathens that it'd turn out he'd married a cultural & intellectual savage. All sorts of wild ranting. Ask her to turn it down? No, no, we never left the room; certainly, we were never instructed to say anything.”

“He followed me past the garden. I hid around the tree but he tracked me by the trampled grasses.”

In early 1929 Wilson “Stinky” Monroe met with Melville enthusiast D.H. Lawrence. There Monroe insisted Melville deserved noting better than a co-authorship of *Moby Dick*. “Our blood went into that book, and a good many of our words, too.” The nature of the improbable leap from such competent fictions as *White-Jacket* and *Typee* to *Moby Dick*'s vast “horrible fabric” had long perplexed scholars. Melville, the boy suggested, owed “most of how the book ended up” to their combined unbounded imagination.

“He said he'd cut my throat if I told a word. He said the Old Master would never believe anyhow.”

“I was so silent and still against the tree that I felt each step the ants took as they crawled up my ankle, my leg, now along my hand and my wrist. I listened for his footsteps in the grass. I don't know if I meant to yell or thrash away, I don't know. A breeze then blew his scent, a musky... you know a boy whose body is mid-metamorphosis into man, often emits a particular *animal* pungency. Oh God it made me dizzy. He took my wrist in his big calloused palm

& said 'Run away with me mum. Run away with me & I'll make a queen of you'."

"I wrote most the best parts of that book. You can bet your life on it. We all did. We put our blood in it."

"Nat said to me please don't let him send anywhere. Please I'm so scared—"

"We never saw him with exception of Sundays and then he was mostly silent. We [Elizabeth and little Pete] trailed him through the woods and paused at ponds to watch the tadpoles flittering in the mucky water. He muttered sometimes and I'd say, quite naturally too, 'could you speak up Herman? We didn't hear you.' He'd just say 'No, nothing just the book.' Or he'd start laughing, out of no where, neither of us would speak, watching Herman double over, finally he'd wipe his eyes with a handkerchief, 'Ah Pip,' he'd say, 'such a youth, such a fool.' To become so fixated with a book—"

"My god am I ripped at the seams, am I no more than a man of aged rags and cloths? Am I slowly torn into nothingness?"

"His black eyes and his pink lip trembling, smaller and smaller."

"I was only a boy but I knew where to find a pistol. During the day while they worked in *his* office I hid the pistol under my pillow. I'd never fired one before but I had some idea. There was no one, no one at all, to protect me anymore."

"Come away with me mum."

"One afternoon Melville dozed off, wearied we supposed, and we didn't stop. We had our pens and our pages and we continued on, freely, entirely unencumbered. Later, when we read

through these pages, he nodded as he did when pleased with his fruits. 'Ah Pip,' he said, 'how magnificent you are. What a wellspring this genius of mine is!'"

"I feigned sleep and when they came for me Blood everywhere. And pieces of... pieces of... The others backed away. Eyes lined the walls—"

"I slapped him away and ran to the woods but caught me & pulled me down like a doe cut down by the hunter's arrow. We tussled in the sun some while. Welts and lashes all over his young hard body. *'He did this? He?'*"

"We carried Willie out back, shrouded in curtains, soaked with red. Shot clean through his chest. We always said Willie Blackcap was all heart and now there wasn't nothing left. Dug him a little plot down by the creek. Appropriate, see, because he laid his first milkmaid there. Said a few words in memoriam, "To the scamp!" The old man sat rocking on the porch with a bottle of whisky to his lips. Then Willie was just a mound of dirt. You say he was our memories now but that's different."

"Papa said a man like Herman Melville, a man who plays like a boy, with little of the seriousness required for a man's life, he makes no kind of husband. But Charlie was no boy. He wasn't afraid of Herman or anyone else."

"Ah Pip!"

"His eye smaller and smaller—"

"But I couldn't leave Herman. Nor could I leave my son. I couldn't. 'My heart,' I said, 'my heart belongs to you forever—'"

“The old man stood out by Willie's mound. Shaking out a canister of gasoline. Flames shooting up around him. Wailing like you never heard a man wail.”

“Charlie's warm ink stained hands on my breast.”

“My god, I am no prophet! All of this, all of this then, out of madness, not out of divinity?”

“Smaller into nothing—”

“Too much,” Elizabeth Melville wrote to her father of *Moby Dick*, “Too much *wasted* on such a failure.”

“Ah Willie! Ah my boy! You poor sweet faced youth. Gone now! Our memories, Willie, our memories will haunt us forever with your laughter, your joy, your enduring excuses, your misspellings & badly slanted penmanship. *Oh Willie*. My boy. Gone & gone forever & my heart, wither hast thou gone too?”

