

**THE MAN WHO LIVED WITH
THE CANNIBALS**

Excerpt from the
Drama / Adventure / Fictional Biography

Screenplay

by

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IN BLACK:

Insistent pounding of jungle DRUMS from the valley of the Typees slowly builds to a frenzy under these opening supers...

FIRST SUPER:

By 1850, Herman Melville had published five novels, all With great popular success. In 1851, he released Moby Dick to an expectant public. Commercially, it was a disaster.

SECOND SUPER:

His career in ruins, Melville floundered for several years. In desperation, he lectured to support himself, accepting engagements wherever he might still find an audience.

THIRD SUPER:

To attract paying customers who expected lurid tales and exotic adventures, he billed himself as:

TITLE:

THE MAN WHO LIVED WITH THE CANNIBALS

FADE IN:

EXT. STREET - DAY, SPRING, 1860

The drums become the gentle CLOPPING of hoofbeats. A well-to-do family navigates their horse-drawn buggy up the main avenue of a cozy town. In their going-to-meeting clothes: FATHER, 31, at the reins... and MOTHER, 29. Between them, fidgeting in a stiff dress suit... their SON, 8. Heavy foot traffic around them. Everyone headed the same way.

MOTHER

Do sit still. We're almost there.

SON

Yes, Mother.

FATHER

You can't blame him for being excited.

MOTHER

Just because he's going to hear about savages doesn't mean he has to act like one.

EXT. TOWN HALL - DAY

The sign on a stand by the steps of the building reads:
TODAY ONLY

The Man Who Lived With The Cannibals
An Address By Herman Melville

As Father hitches the carriage, the Boy leaps from his seat. Skitters between the CROWD until he slams into the legs of a FARMER, early 50's, short but solid, his weathered clothes stark against the finery worn by his neighbors. With eyes stormy as the sea, the Farmer turns. The storm passes quickly as Father and Mother hurry toward them.

MOTHER

We're terribly sorry, Sir. He quite got away from us.

FARMER

'Tis no bother, Madam. Boys are bound to be boys. I was one myself once.

JAMES

Are you here for the exhibition?

FARMER

I should hope so. I paid a pretty penny for my ticket.

JAMES

I hope it's worth it. I've heard it said outright the man is a pure fraud.

The Farmer scratches his arm absently. The Boy notices a jagged old scar running the length of his forearm. Seeing the Boy's unwanted fascination, the Farmer uncomfortably lowers the sleeve of his shirt to cover his arm.

FARMER

Perhaps today we'll hear the truth of his tale. Good day to you all.

He turns to follow the crowd in.

MOTHER

Come on, then. We don't want to be late.

INT. TOWN HALL, AUDITORIUM - DAY

The audience files in. The room BUZZES in eager anticipation. Father guides his family to seats near the back.

FEMALE NEIGHBOR #1

I wrote my sister to tell her about this. She's so jealous that she can't be here.

FEMALE NEIGHBOR #2

I've read all his books. Well, most of them. They're so scandalous.

FEMALE NEIGHBOR #1

Yes. Quite exciting.

FEMALE NEIGHBOR #2

Except that one about the whale.

FEMALE NEIGHBOR #1

I don't know whatever possessed that poor man to write it. It's so depressing.

The Boy notices the Farmer seated directly behind his family in the last row. He tugs at his father's sleeve.

SON

Father...

FATHER

Not now, son. Quiet, please.

From a side door near the stage, a bearded man enters to take his place at the lectern. His stately manner weighted by a heavy, possibly even painful burden. He is...

HERMAN MELVILLE, 41. Time has not treated him kindly. He looks older. The audience BUZZ quiets immediately.

MELVILLE

Good day, kind ladies and gentlemen. From the sign at the front door of this establishment, I'm sure you're all aware by now that I am the man who dwelt among the cannibals.

Mother watches Father roll his eyes. She nudges her husband.

MELVILLE (CONT'D)

How I came to this strange situation has been the subject of much conversation. I am here today to present my side of the issue, and to give you all the opportunity to decide the merit of my tale. My strange tropical adventure began, oddly enough, on a blustery winter's afternoon...

EXT. ACUSHNET, NEW BEDFORD - LATE AFTERNOON, JANUARY, 1841

Moored in the grey Massachusetts winter, a whaler fit for her maiden voyage. On the dock, a help-wanted sign advertises for crew. Next to it, a mousy man in a heavy winter coat sits behind an unsteady table... the STEWARD. Writes in a ledger, ignores sea-hardened MEN patiently waiting in line.

MELVILLE (V.O.)

Some years ago, having little or no money in my purse and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about and see the watery part of the world. It was a way I had of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation.

Waiting in line, holding a tattered carpet bag, a clean-shaven, yet familiar face: MELVILLE, 21. Behind him...

TOBY, ten years his senior, shorter, more powerfully built. Carries a duffel.

MELVILLE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

When I went to sea, I went as a simple sailor, right before the mast, plumb down into the forecandle, aloft there to the royal mast-head. I always went to sea as a sailor, because they made a point of paying me for my trouble, whereas they never paid passengers a single penny I ever heard of.

STEWARD

Next. Next man in line. You there, sir. Step lively now.

BILLY, the tall, muscular man in front of Melville, steps up to the Steward's table.

BILLY

Do you mean me, sir?

STEWARD

You are next in line, so it only seems right to take you next. Ever sailed on a whaler, my good man?

BILLY

Oh, yes, sir. 'Course I have.

STEWARD

Specialty?

BILLY

I'm handy with a long oar, and I have a strong back. No fish ever outrun a boat I been lowered in, let me tell you.

STEWARD

Good enough. Sign here.

Billy scrawls his name in the ledger.

STEWARD (CONT'D)

Up you go to your three squares and bed. We sail at first light. With any luck, we'll be back before the autumn leaves fall. Your pay and your share of the profit will be waiting for you when we are once again safely docked. Next in line. Name?

TOBY

That's you, Mate. Step right up.

MELVILLE

Melville. Herman Melville.

STEWARD

What takes you a-whaling, my good man?
Been before?

MELVILLE

No, Sir. But I've served four voyages
in the merchant fleet and I'm a hard
worker.

STEWARD

Hard down out of that, lad! It's a rugged
life you're choosing with no schedule
like the merchant ships. If you have a
lady's heart to break, it will surely
be broken, for she can no more count on
us to return on our promised date than
on the height of the next wave.

MELVILLE

There's no one waiting for my return,
Sir. Besides, whalers pay the highest
wages, and I've always dreamed of chasing
the leviathan.

A tall, stern figure, leans over the Acushnet's rail...
CAPTAIN MARRYATT. Sea-weathered at 50. Calls to the Steward...

MARRYATT

What's the delay, man? I see a line of
able bodies on the dock and nobody aboard
to pull this ship together. The owners
have instructed me to cast off in the
morning and cast off I will.

STEWARD

Aye, sir. This young man doesn't have
whaling experience.

MARRYATT

Well how's he to get it if you don't
sign him up? He looks fit enough. Sign
him aboard.

STEWARD

Aye, Sir. Sign here.

He points to the ledger. Melville signs, lingers awkwardly
by the table, offers his hand.

STEWARD (CONT'D)

What are you waiting for? You heard the captain. Up you go. Next in line.

INT. ACUSHNET FORE-CABIN - LATE AFTERNOON

Melville descends the ladder to below-decks. Enters the crew's bunk room. Cramped bunks built against the interior hull.

MELVILLE

This will never do.

The bunks get longer toward the prow. Melville moves to one that's empty. Throws his carpet bag onto the hard mattress.

STUBBS

Hey, there young fellow. Mind your manners. Take your gear from that bunk, and mind you be quick about it.

Melville turns to find a very large, very strong, very outraged sailor behind him... STUBBS. Everyone stares at the confrontation. Toby enters the cabin as Melville quickly obeys the order. Stubbs' anger vanishes like a passing storm.

MELVILLE

I meant no offense, sir.

STUBBS

None, taken, young fellow. But remember, the long bunks are for the harpooners and them alone. Until you're ready to take on whales with none but an iron rod between you and your eternity, you make way for those who do. Understand?

TOBY

Pssstt....

Toby beckons him to the rear of the cabin as he sets his gear in the short bottom bunk. Melville stows his bag in up top.

TOBY (CONT'D)

It's all right. Just remember to mind your manners. Stick with me and you'll be fine straight away. Call me Toby.

MELVILLE

Thank you.

He offers his hand. Before Toby can shake it, a gigantic HARPOONER bumps into Melville as he enters the cabin. Melville turns but thinks the better of protesting. The man is surly and unkempt, but carries his massive whale-spear gently. Lays the harpoon against the bulk-head with delicate precision. Loads his gear into the bunk Melville wanted.

TOBY

There's a harpooner for you.

MELVILLE

He acts as if he believes himself to be royalty.

TOBY

Close enough on a whale ship, mate. Harpooners eat first, sleep late, and never scrub or clean. But they're also the first into the long boats. Them who go face to face with monster whales earn their rank sure enough, I guess. Except for the captain himself, they run this ship. Only their personal rowers have leave to talk back to them.

A smaller, unshaven man with a greasy apron over his storm coat stalks in... the COOK. Heads toward the harpooner bunks.

COOK

Dinner time, you ugly brutes. Let's get to it so I can feed the honest men aboard this ship.

The massive harpooner and two more just like him follow the cook out quietly. Toby winks at Melville.

TOBY

Oh, yes. And the cook, of course.

EXT. ACUSHNET, NEW BEDFORD - MORNING

The graceful craft prepares to leave the safety of the harbor. The FIRST MATE barks orders from the fore-deck...

FIRST MATE

Strike the tent there, ye sons of bachelors. Aft there. Man the capstan and prepare to heave to. Blood and thunder, man, move!

ACUSHNET, DECK

Sailors scurry to remove a massive tent. Melville and Toby take their places at the hand-spikes to weigh anchor. The captain enters from his quarters.

MARRYATT

Ready to heave to, Mister?

FIRST MATE

Aye, Sir.

MARRYATT

Then get to it.

FIRST MATE

Aye, Sir. Heave to!

The men lean into the wheel. The anchor comes up very slowly.

MARRYATT

Is that the way they heave in the merchant service, whelp? Spring to and break your back bone, or I'll gladly do it for you. Spring, I say, all of you.

Angry, Marryatt kicks Melville's backside. Melville turns hurt eyes toward the captain's hard glare. Wanting no part of this abuse, the other men strain harder to turn the wheel.

ACUSHNET

The anchor rises quickly out of the sea. The ship becomes one with the waves.

ACUSHNET, DECK

Melville forgotten as quickly as the kick, the captain heads toward the pilot house.

MARRYATT

Prepare to set the sails, Mister.

FIRST MATE

Aye, Sir.

MARRYATT

And look smart about it.

TOBY

God bless you, Captain Vangs.

FIRST MATE

What's that, Lad?

TOBY

Nothing, Sir.

FIRST MATE

Take your nothing up top, and take your worthless friend for ballast. Get those sails set and be quick about it.

TOBY

Aye, Sir. Come on, Mate.

Toby and Melville scamper to the main mast. Climb in fluid motion. High above the deck, they shimmy out over the mainsail to unfurl it. Now in the sailor's domain, they relax.

MELVILLE

What was that you called the captain?

Toby pulls on a loose rope.

TOBY

Who, old Vangs? Why one of these when he hangs loose and blows like an evil breeze, ready to fly into a great temper for no purpose? I can't imagine.

MELVILLE

It's my guess that it would be best not let him hear you voice that sentiment.

TOBY

There's my proof that the merchant service hasn't robbed you of all your wits, Mate. 'Course I wouldn't let that old bandit know what I think of him.

FIRST MATE

Sail ho!

Toby and Melville let go of the mainsail. It unfurls majestically in the winter's breeze.

TOBY

We're off, Mate.

MELVILLE

So it seems.

TOBY

Has anybody ever told you that you talk peculiar? All formal and such. Kind of like a professor.

MELVILLE

I used to teach school.

TOBY

On top of four merchant voyages? You've been a busy boy.

MELVILLE

It's a big world with a lot to see.

TOBY

And a lot to learn, Professor. A lot to learn.

ACUSHNET AT SEA, NORTH ATLANTIC

As the ship cuts easily through the cold water, sailors watch the New England coast fall away.

ACUSHNET, DECK

From the rear of the ship, the HELMSMAN steers the big wheel with calm assurance. Without a word between them, Marryatt stands behind, gazing steadily toward the Southern horizon.

The helmsman nods to port. The captain shakes his head. The helmsman nods to starboard. The captain nods slightly. The helmsman scowls. Mutters...

HELMSMAN

It's to be the Horn, is it? Very well.

The helmsman adjusts course. Satisfied, Marryatt smiles.

ACUSHNET, QUARTERDECK

Stubbs and Melville mop. From the hold below, the NOISE of fowl and swine. Melville peeks below the deck.

INT. ACUSHNET, HOLD - DAY

Chickens and pigs caged and penned. Grain in sacks. Barrels of hardtack for when the rest has all been eaten.

EXT. ACUSHNET, QUARTERDECK

Lost in thought, Melville grabbed from behind by Toby.

MELVILLE

I say! You've almost given me an apoplectic seizure.

TOBY

Have you heard the news, Professor? We're off 'round the Horn. Old Vangs wants to make the whaling line at his earliest convenience.

STUBBS

Where did you come by those tidings, Boy-o?

TOBY

I overheard the helmsman running it through his mind. He thinks out loud, you know.

STUBBS

This won't be the South Seas cruise I had in mind, I'll tell you true.

MELVILLE

I don't see where it really matters. It's summer now in the Southern Hemisphere. Our passage should be the gentlest possible.

STUBBS

Have you ever come round the Horn, Sonny?

MELVILLE

Sad to say, I haven't. In the merchant fleet, I visited the Continent and the Ivory Coast, but I have never seen the Blue Pacific.

STUBBS

Then you're in for a treat, if we get there. But if you'd ever gone before, you'd know there's no such thing as a gentle voyage 'round the Horn, winter, summer, spring or fall. We'll find what this ship is made of soon enough. Oh, yes we will. You can count on that.

EXT. ACUSHNET, APPROACHING THE HORN - DAY, WEEKS LATER

The sky dark and foreboding even at mid-afternoon. Wind HOWLS. Waves high. The sturdy ship ably rides the rough waters.

ACUSHNET, DECK

Lashed to the ship's massive steering wheel, the helmsman works under Marryatt's statue-quiet gaze. Sailors work feverishly to secure loose objects along the rest of the ship. The great mainsail flaps furiously.

ACUSHNET, FOREDECK

Toby and Melville batten down flapping whale boats.

TOBY

Just a pleasant summer's day, eh, Professor?

MELVILLE

It could be worse, you know.

TOBY

Could be better, too. If only that blasted Vangs had taken us 'round Good Hope, we'd get there safe for sure. The whales will wait, you know.

The First Mate staggers toward them.

FIRST MATE

You two, get up in the riggings and secure that mainsail. We can't have it whipping about. That's trouble for sure.

TOBY

Why pick on us, mate? We're busy here.

FIRST MATE

Step lively and no back talk. It's Captain's orders. Disobedience is sure to bring his boot. Look smart about it and I won't tell him that you've given me a bit of your guff.

TOBY

Well, what are you waiting for, Professor? It's up we go.

ACUSHNET, MAST

After crawling gingerly along the ship's deck, Toby and Melville actually seem more secure as they climb the mast.

TOBY

You take that line there and secure it. I'll take the one above.

Melville grabs a free line, pulls it smartly. The ship pitches suddenly. He swings perilously over the ship's rail.

TOBY (CONT'D)

Hold on for your life, Professor!

MELVILLE

I am holding on, for God's sake.

TOBY

Make a grab for the mast, Mate. I'll pull you in from above.

ACUSHNET, DECK

The crew watches Melville helplessly. Marryatt bellows...

MARRYATT

Back to your stations, lazy blackguards. Go about your business, or it's the briny deep for us all.

The crew reluctantly turns back to their business. Marryatt calls to Billy and Stubbs...

MARRYATT (CONT'D)

Get a hook out to that lad and pull him in. I'm not about to lose a share to his family without getting full work out of him. Move sprightly now and there'll be an extra ration of rum with your supper.

ACUSHNET, MAST

Toby finds the end of the line whipping in the wind. A lunge, it hisses across the skin of his arm like an angry snake. Flesh torn, he SCREAMS as he lunges again to catch the line.

Tugs with all his might. Below, Billy and Stubbs prod at Melville with a harpoon. Melville grabs on. Once back to the mast, he immediately climbs toward where he should have been.

TOBY

It's all right, Professor. I'll finish up. You just rest.

MARRYATT

No, boy. Finish the job yourself. Or are you just some old woman on board for ballast, after all?

Melville looks up at Toby, down at Marryatt, up again then down again. Finishes his climb. Lashes down the line.

STUBBS

That a boy, Professor. That a boy.

TOBY

God bless you, Captain Vangs. I'd like to see you dance on the line some time.

INT. ACUSHNET, DINING CABIN - EVENING

The wind HOWLS outside, but the crew is safe and warm in cramped quarters. The cook serves generous bowls of chowder and steaming loaves of fresh bread.

COOK

Captain's orders and compliments, Lads. Eat your hearty fill for the good job done today, for there's more of the same on the morrow and you'll need your strength for that.

The bone-weary crew GROANS.

COOK (CONT'D)

Ah, but there's the South Seas beyond and beautiful island girls to think of. The rest is all downhill. So eat your hearty fill, me boys, and dream of them savage beauties with pretty black hair and long, lovely legs.

CHEERS as the crew turns to their bread and stew. Toby glances at an apron hanging on a hook, gets up swiftly, RIPS the bottom hem and returns to his seat. Melville watches wide-eyed as the sailor wraps his bloody arm in the fabric.

MELVILLE

I should think you'd have the ship's doctor take a look at your arm.

TOBY

And be docked a month's share before the first iron is even hurled? Besides, cook is our physician. I'd wager he'd as soon cut off my arm and boil it for rations to make cannibals of us all!

The men at the table LAUGH.

MELVILLE

I've heard the island women wear next to nothing, and every one of them has soft, clear skin and dark eyes that dance in the sunset. Is it true?

STUBBS

That's not all that dances in the sunset, Professor. You're yet to live until you seen the hula-hula.

TOBY

And you haven't felt nothing 'til you feel the soft caress of an island girl.

BILLY

It's true enough, all right. You might see it, too, if we run out of stores before we hunt down them big fish. Meself, I'm in no hurry. I got plenty of living to do before one of them savage lovelies has me for her supper.

MELVILLE

Surely they can't all be cannibals.

TOBY

Those island savages eat each other for their breakfast, lunch and supper, and they'll have you for dessert if you don't mind your step.

MELVILLE

You don't say!

His table-mates roar with LAUGHTER.

STUBBS

Oh, it's real enough, all right, Professor. Just mind your step and you'll come back with stories to tell in that lovely way of yours.