about the author

Herman Melville was born in 1819. His formal education ended in 1834, at age fifteen. For a time he was both clerk and school teacher, but the sea was his first love. He became a cabin boy on a merchant ship bound for England. Later, in 1841, Melville joined the crew of a whaling ship, the Acushnet, where he learned much of the background for Moby Dick.

Melville was influenced by the writing of Nathaniel Hawthorne and dedicated Moby Dick to him. Melville felt that Hawthorne had an insight into human nature that few could surpass.

Melville, too, knew mankind mainly from living in many cultures. His life with the Taipis, cannibal natives, led him to write Typee. From a mutiny he experienced, he wrote Omoo. One of his later books, and most heart-rending is Billy Budd—the story of a young and severely abused seaman.

In spite of his unusual creative ability, Melville spent nineteen years of his life as a customs officer in the ports of New York City. Not until after his death was he truly appreciated as an author. Today Moby Dick is considered to be one of the greatest, if not the greatest, American novel.
The young man's name was Billy Budd. His story is still told on English ships today.
The year was 1797. The Rights of Man, a British merchant ship, was preparing to return to England with a load of goods.
Billy was twenty-one. He had been at sea most of his life, and he loved it.

Billy Budd, sir. Able seaman.

Aye. Welcome aboard.

Good to meet you, lad.

Thank you.

That's my bunk!

Sorry, I'll take another.
At the start of any trip, the crew was divided into two "watches" or periods of work. The first mate chose someone for the larboard watch. The second mate then chose a man for the starboard or right watch. Back and forth it went between the mates until every man was chosen.

Billy was one of the first sailors picked. The "boys," on the other hand, were chosen last. These were the men who had never been to sea before.
I'm the new "boy." I was a farmer, and I don't know about the sea. Will you help me?

Of course.

But I can't read or write.

Most sailors can't. I can't either. But you'll learn fast.

The bow is in front—with the forecastle where we sleep. The officers' quarters are aft.
What are the ship’s bells?

We’re on duty four hours, then off four hours. The bells ring one for a half-hour, two for one hour, and so on.

Eight bells is for the end of the watch. If it’s eight o’clock, that means breakfast!

And we always clean the decks on the four-to-eight o’clock watch.

You’ve got a lot to learn!
Eight bells rang out. The men rushed down to the forecastle for their tin cups, and got coffee from the cookhouse.

Max brought us our food. Spoon it onto your plate.

But take your place in line—last—behind the handsome sailor.

Soon we'll have the same thing for breakfast that we do for dinner and supper.

Right. Salt beef and hardtack—with beetles and worms!

If the biscuit's too hard for your teeth, crack it on your partner's head!
Red Whiskers, one of the older sailors, hadn't liked Billy at first. But Billy kept smiling. Then one day Red Whiskers went too far.

You fool!

He gave Billy a poke in the ribs.

Billy tried to answer and couldn't. Instead, he knocked Red Whiskers down.

I'm sorry! Sometimes I get so mad that I can't talk. That makes me feel even worse—so I hit instead.

You sure do, my lad! Now help me up so we can shake hands!
Later Billy and Henry worked on the sails.
The mainmast is in the center. The foremast is toward the bow. The mizenmast is aft.

Right. We’re climbing down the shrouds now.

All of the sails have names. And so do all the riggings—down to the smallest rope.

The riggings have to be painted with tar so the damp sea air won’t rot them.

You’re a good teacher, Billy. But let me add something. Tar your boots and your hat. It makes them waterproof.

Soon the new man had learned most of the things a sailor had to know.
You have to be a jack-of-all-trades on a merchant ship!

A carpenter.

A painter.

A rope maker.

A knot tier.

We sing and pull the ropes together.

We have to be brave and have strong stomachs!
On four-hour watches, we'd always be on duty at the same time.

So four o'clock to eight o'clock at night is divided into two watches. We call them dog watches.

The dog watch is the only time we get to take it easy.

And to spin yarns. Did I tell you about the fight at Spitfire?

Oh, oh! Here it comes!
It was April of this year, 1797. There wasn't enough food.

So the sailors fought?

Sure—until the navy heard of it!

They went and told the British government that things were pretty bad for the men on navy ships.

Aye. So the government heard them, and talked to the leaders. And things got better.
Now I'll tell you about the great mutiny at the Nore. It was in May. Thousands of sailors fought the British officers. The sailors took down the British flag and put up their own.

But the marines were faithful to the British, so the sailors lost. The leaders of the sailors were hanged.

A sailor's life is still hard. And every captain watches his crew very closely.
Billy was lucky to sail on the Rights Of Man. Captain Graveling was a fair man, and the crew liked him. The crew also liked Billy.

There you are, handsome Billy. I sewed your jacket for you! It's as good as new. Thank you!

You're the best in the sky ropes, but I'm better with a needle.

One day the carpenter took Billy down to his workshop.

There you are, my lad! I made it just for you. Just a way to say thanks for the times you cheered me up.

My dear friend! It's beautiful!
In the year 1797, France was ruled by Napoleon. He wanted to take over all of Europe. So the British went to war against France.

Why is that warship sending an officer to our ship?

They want to take some of our sailors.

But we don't have enough men for our own ship!

Neither do they. And you don't argue with the navy!
The men came down to see what was going to happen.

Not many men join the navy for the food! Some are forced to join.

But if they love the sea . . .

Some of them do, and some of them don't. Some have just run away from the police.

And some were put on board when they were too drunk to know it.

Or given knock-out drops and dragged aboard.
Your name and age, lad.

Billy Budd, sir. Age twenty-one.

I'll take Billy. Now, Captain Graveling, kindly show me the rest of your crew.

Billy Budd was the only man that Lt. Ratcliffe wanted.

Get your things, Billy. I'll have a drink with your captain.
Sir, you are taking my best man.

Yes, I know. I'm sorry.

Before I had Billy, my men were always fighting.

He is like a big, friendly St. Bernard dog. Everybody loves him.

King George III will be happy to learn he is getting such a good man for his navy.
It's no joke, sir. You're taking my peacemaker.

Sorry. We need him.

Billy, you cannot take that big box on board a warship. Put your things in a bag.

Billy, we'll miss you. Aren't you sorry to leave?

Aye. But it's like a change in the weather. What can you do but face it with a smile?
Lt. Ratcliffe and Billy left the Rights of Man. As he passed the merchant ship, Billy stood up and saluted.

Goodbye, old Rights of Man!

Get down, sir! That is not allowed!
Once on board the Indomitable, Billy was quickly taken to an officer.

Who was your father?

I don't know, sir.

William Budd, where is your place of birth?

I don't know, sir.

Do you know anything about your beginnings?

No, sir. But I've heard that I was found in a basket at someone's house in Bristol.

Although he could not answer the officer's questions, the men could see that he was healthy and would make a good sailor. So Billy was rated as an able seaman.
The Indomitable was a seventy-four, meaning that the warship carried seventy-four cannons.

I've never seen so many men in my life! How many are on board?

I don't know for sure. Maybe 500. Plus the marines and other soldiers.

It's like a country of its own, with the captain as king. We're all divided into small groups.

We each have certain jobs to do, and every minute is planned for us.
Hang your hammock here—if you can find room! Eighteen inches per man.

Where do I put my bag?

The sailor showed Billy the place, telling him to be sure to keep everything neat.

We’re all foretopmen here. We’ll work, sleep, and eat together.

We’re the lucky ones, really. We’re mostly up high, where it isn’t crowded.
Breakfast is at eight o'clock. Dinner is at twelve. Supper is at four. And no more eating for sixteen hours!

Eight bells. Danny's gone to get our food. So pull up a shot box.

Danny, are you sure the cook didn't cheat us?

Salt beef, hard tack, and rum. All here.

I'm used to that.

Billy felt at home right away.
Life on his new ship was fine with Billy Budd. He worked harder than all the other sailors.

Billy, you're working too fast.

The sooner we finish, the sooner I can listen to your yarns.

The sound of drums was heard. From all parts of the Indomitable voices called out, "Everyone on deck to watch punishment."

A beating! Hurry, lad!

I-I'll b-be s-sick!

Everyone watches. It's the rules. Stand in the back if you think it might bother you.
Prisoner, you have broken the rules. You are to get twelve lashes. Take off your shirt.

The first lash drew blood. By the twelfth lash, the prisoner's back was cut to pieces.

Easy, lad. On this ship, if you break one rule, you get the lash. You'll get used to it.

What a terrible thing to do to a man!

Never!
Billy Budd

How can the captain be so cruel?

Ah, Captain Vere is a fair man, lad.

Some captains beat their men for no reason at all!

The captain loves to read books. He knows his rules better than most.

Just follow the rules, and you’ll be all right.

Billy became extra careful. He obeyed all orders. But strange things began to happen.
Sailor, be more careful.

But what have I done?

The corporal keeps finding things wrong with me!

Well, sew yourself up in your bag, and keep your eyes open.

Billy looked to an old sailor called the Dansker for help.

Billy, Jemmy Legs is out to get you. His name is Claggart, the master-at-arms. Watch out for him!

But he always has a good word for me when I pass him.
Soon it was mealtime.

What do you know of John Claggart, the master-at-arms?

Little except for what I've heard about him. You can be sure that he never sailed before this trip.

Aye. He may be in charge now, but I bet the police were chasing him on land.

The ship moved suddenly. Billy's soup spilled out on the deck just as Claggart was passing.

Nicely done, lad!

As Claggart was smiling, the men felt they had to laugh.
The master-at-arms continued on his way, talking to himself.

I think Billy threw that soup.

So Claggart struck out at a boy coming from the other direction.

Why does old Jemmy Legs hate Billy Budd?

Because Billy is both good-looking and nice. When he wants something on Billy, I have to make it up.

That's not fair to Billy.

Maybe not. But I take orders from Claggart. And so do you!
Just after dinner, the beating of drums was heard throughout the Indomitable.

Hurry! Do you know which is your cannon?

Aye. Number five.

What is it?

A practice battle, but you must still hurry!

Billy found that pulling the cannons was the hardest work of all.
Sundays on the Indomitable were very much like any other day, except that the chaplain said a short prayer, and the captain looked over the sailors.

On the first Sunday of each month, the captain read the Articles of War.

I counted them! Out of twenty things a man can do that are wrong, seventeen can be punished by death.

We're at war, Billy.
One warm night, Billy went on deck to sleep. He was awakened by a touch on his shoulder.

Come here, Billy. I want to talk with you. But be quiet!

You were impressed like me, right? And there are others aboard. They are all yours if you help us.

Leave me alone!

The sailor ran away as Billy’s voice grew louder.
Is that you, Billy? What’s wrong?

Just a guard on our part of the ship. I sent him back.

The other sailor went back to sleep, but Billy didn’t know what to think. He had never been asked to do anything wrong before.

The next day, Billy saw the guard on the gun deck. He gave Billy a friendly nod.

A few days later, the guard gave Billy another cheerful greeting. Billy did not answer.

Billy never thought of reporting the guard as a troublemaker.
But Billy again asked the old Dansker for help.

Didn't I tell you, Billy Budd? Old Jemmy legs is out to get you.

What does Claggart have to do with the guard?

Claggart sent him to you, lad. To catch you doing something wrong.

I can't believe that.

Because Billy was so good, he did not know about the evil looks Claggart gave him.
The Indomitable had been sent on special duty. It was far from the other British ships. One day Claggart asked for a meeting with Captain Vere.

Well? What is it, master-at-arms?

I have reason to believe there is a sailor making trouble with the impressed men.

A bad man aboard? Name him. William Budd.
Billy, the handsome sailor? The young fellow so well liked by the others?
The same. He's not as nice as he looks!

I know of the man, but I have heard only good reports. Tell me something to prove that what you say is true.

Claggart then listed the many small charges he had stored up against Billy.
Captain Vere turned to a midshipman.

Send Albert, my cabin boy, to me.

Do you know Billy Budd?

Yes, sir.

Find him and bring him to my cabin. Don’t let him talk to anyone else!

Master-at-arms, quietly follow the sailor into my cabin.
The captain was a good judge of men. He did not trust Claggart. He felt that when the master-at-arms faced Billy, he would be able to learn the truth.

Shut the door. Let no one in.

Now, master-at-arms, tell this man face-to-face what you have told me.

Claggart stood directly in front of Billy. He repeated what he had told the captain. Billy could not believe what he was hearing.

Speak, man! Speak! Say that it isn't true!
Billy turned pale. His mouth opened, but only strange sounds came out. The captain understood.

There is no hurry, my boy. Take your time. Take your time.

The harder Billy tried to speak, the more trouble he had. Suddenly his right arm shot out and Claggart dropped to the deck.

What have you done?
The captain looked at Claggart. When he got up, he was very angry.

Go to that room and stay there until I call you.

Silently, Billy obeyed.

Blocking the door so that no one could see in, the captain sent for the doctor.

He is dead. A devil has been struck down by an angel. And the angel must hang!
Captain Vere told the doctor what had happened. They moved the body to another room.

I shall call a drumhead court. Tell the officers about it, but tell them to keep the matter quiet.

But the officers did not like this news. The captain of the marines was not happy either.

A drumhead court? Why not put him in irons until we reach the rest of the ships? The captain's orders must be obeyed.

A drumhead court? To disobey would be mutiny.

The officers knew that such a trial was correct during wartime. But they also knew that Billy had been provoked into killing Claggart.
The doctor wondered if the captain was all right. Indeed, Captain Vere was having a hard time making up his mind.

The lad could not help it. But I can't keep him in irons until the admiral decides what to do.

The whole ship would know—and feel sorry for the lad.

They might rise up and mutiny.

In times of war we can't have trouble. The king's navy is more important than the life of one man.
Several officers made up the drumhead court. Captain Vere told exactly what Claggart had said and what Billy had done.

Captain Vere has spoken. Is it or is it not as Captain Vere says?

It is just as Captain Vere says. But what the master-at-arms said about me was not true. I am loyal to the king!
None, I am sorry he is dead. If I could have talked, I would not have hit him.

Was there bad feeling between you?

He lied to my face! In front of my captain! I wanted to answer, but I couldn't.

I believe you.
Did you know of any trouble starting up in the ship?

No, sir.

Billy did not want to speak against the guard.

Why should the master-at-arms lie about you if there were no bad feelings between you?

I-I don't know, sir.

Only the dead man can answer that.
Billy Budd

It is all so strange.

Aye. But we must deal with what Billy has done.

Budd, if you have anything more to say for yourself, say it now.

I have said it all, sir.

The guard was called. He took Billy back to another room and watched over him.
Captain Vere stood with his back to the drumhead court. The three officers spoke together for a few minutes, and then they were silent. The captain turned.

I share your feelings for the prisoner. But as the king's officers, we are not free men.

There is a war going on, whether we like it or not.

Your hearts are moved, as is mine. But our heads must stay clear.
We must follow wartime law.

If a man strikes an officer, and the officer dies.

Could we not find him guilty—but let him go?

No. The sailors would wonder why. They would think we were afraid of them. They might mutiny.

The court said that Billy was guilty. He was to be hanged during the early morning watch.
Captain Vere chose to tell Billy himself, alone. As they came from the room, Billy looked calm, but the captain looked as if his own son were going to die.

Everyone was called on deck. The captain told the men that the master-at-arms was dead; a court had tried a man and found him guilty; and that the prisoner was to be hanged in the early morning watch.

Later the master-at-arms was given a funeral.
Meanwhile, Billy had been taken to the upper gun deck. Only the chaplain was allowed to visit him.

Thank you for coming, Chaplain.

I thought you were asleep. Do you not fear death, my son?

No. Should I?

Indeed not. You are a good lad!

Bending over, the chaplain kissed Billy's cheek.
Eight bells rang. It was four o'clock in the morning. Everyone was called on deck.

God bless Captain Vere!

But it was Billy's name in the hearts of all the men watching.
A sound like that of a storm filled the air. It quickly stopped as the starboard watch was sent below. Soon the larboard watch was put to work.

Billy’s hammock was filled with ballast. After his body was put in, the sailmakers sewed it up. Again, everyone was called on deck.
Billy Budd had a simple funeral. Sea birds circled overhead.

The same sound of a storm filled the air. The men were restless. The sound stopped when the drums beat, calling the men to the cannons for practice.
Not long afterward, the Indomitable fought with a French ship. Captain Vere was hit by a cannon ball.

Did you say something, sir?

Yes. Billy Budd.

Billy Budd.

Those were the captain's last words.

THE END
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