

BY MARK LUZIO

## Ahab and the Carpenter

**This winter**, a carpenter I have worked with on many projects suggested I reread *Moby Dick*, the iconic American novel written in 1851 by Herman Melville. My last reading was 45 years ago in my freshman year of college. At the time, I didn't appreciate the role carpentry played in the book—nor did I anticipate the role house carpentry, boat millwork, and furniture building would come to play in my own life for more than 40 years.

After diving anew into the 400-page novel, I had to smile when early in chapter 3, Ishmael arrives late on a nasty December night at The Spouter Inn (in New Bedford) and finds no beds. The innkeeper, though, has a plan: "I've got a carpenter's plane there in the bar - wait, I say, and I'll make ye snug enough." ... he vigorously set to planing away at my bed, the while grinning like an ape. The shavings flew right and left; till at last the plane iron came bump against an indestructible knot. The landlord was near spraining his wrist, and I told him for heaven's sake to quit - the bed was soft enough to suit me, and I did not know how all the planing in the world could make eider down of a pine plank." Ishmael then decides that sharing a bed would be a better choice, and this is how he meets Queequeg, a Fijian harpooner.

The ship's carpenter is described near the end of the book in chapter 107: "He was pure manipulator; his brain, if he ever had one, must have early oozed along into the muscles of his fingers."

In chapter 108, Ahab's whale bone peg leg has split and the carpenter has to make a new one: "Drat the file, and drat the bone! That is hard which should be soft, and that soft which should be hard. So we go, who file old jaws and shinbones. Let's try another. Aye, now, this works better (sneezes). Halloo, this bone dust is (sneezes) - why it's (sneezes) - yes it's (sneezes) - bless my soul, it won't let me speak! This is what an old fellow gets now for working in dead lumber. Saw a live tree, and you don't get this dust; amputate a live bone, and you don't get it (sneezes)."

In chapter 110, Queequeg falls ill with fever and asks the carpenter to make his coffin. After testing the fit, he declares he is not ready to die, having an unfinished job on land. He spends his recovery carving the top. "With a wild whimsiness, he now used his coffin for a sea chest; and emptying into it his canvas bag of clothes, set them in order there. Many spare hours he spent, in carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body."

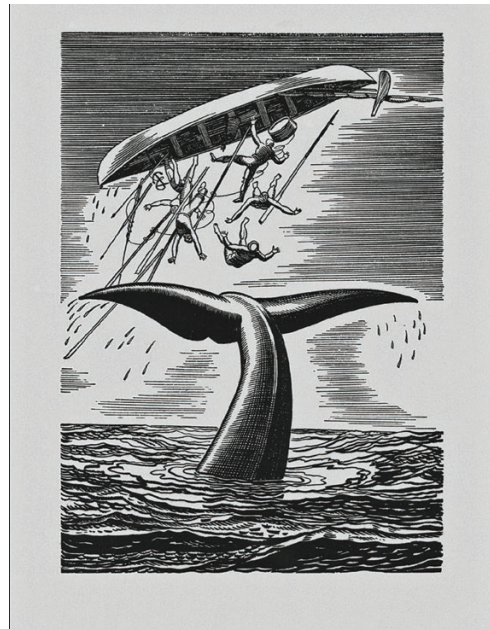
In chapter 126, a sailor falls from the rigging and the ship's life-buoy is thrown, but it sinks and the man drowns. It is decided that if Queequeg's coffin is nailed shut and caulked, it can be hung off the ship's stern as the new life-buoy. The carpenter speaks: "We workers in woods make bridal-bedsteads and card-tables, as well as coffins

and hearses. We work by the month, or by the job, or by the profit; not for us to ask the why and wherefore of our work ... Any way I'll have me thirty separate, Turk's-headed life-lines, each three feet long hanging all round to the coffin. Then if the hull go down, there'll be thirty lively fellows all fighting for one coffin, a sight not seen very often beneath the sun! Come hammer, caulking-iron, pitch-pot, and marling-spike! Let's to it."

We all know that the great book ends with the White Whale ramming The Pequod until she sinks. In the Epilogue, Ishmael is the lone survivor, able to tell his story because: "Owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main."

Ishmael has told his story, beginning on a bench planed almost smooth enough for sleeping, and ending with being saved by a carpenter's well-crafted, well-caulked coffin. In my 45 years as a carpenter, I have never made a coffin, but who knows—I may yet. I still have a few years for which the lessons we carpenters can draw from Ishmael's tale will serve me well: Keep your block plane sharp and your joints tight and caulked!

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Rockwell Kent illustration of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.