***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 22 –Merry Christmas***

***Summary:***

* After the last preparations, gifts from Aunt Charity, and hauling the ship away from the wharf, Captain Peleg and Captain Bildad say goodbye to the first mate, Mr. Starbuck, and make sure everything is ready.
* Captain Ahab is still in his cabin, and Peleg and Bildad give the first orders as though they were going to command the ship.
* They take down the teepee-like tent where Ishmael first met Captain Peleg, a sure sign that they’re actually leaving port.
* Captain Bildad acts as the "pilot" when they navigate the ship out of Nantucket’s harbor.
* Even though Bildad has previously insisted that there wouldn’t be any naughty songs as they got under way, he lets them sing a ditty about a slum filled with prostitutes ("a chorus about the girls in Booble Alley" (22.9).
* Ishmael is astonished by how much Captain Peleg is swearing, and pauses in amazement as he hauls up the anchor. Peleg literally kicks his butt and roars at him to keep working.
* They get the ship under way and they’re almost out upon the open sea. It’s a cold and icy Christmas day.
* Captain Bildad takes the first watch, and everyone can hear him singing hymns. These hymns lift Ishmael’s spirits and make him think that things will be okay.
* Finally, they get the ship far enough out that they don’t need a pilot to navigate the harbor anymore.
* A sailboat that’s been following them comes alongside to take Captain Peleg and Captain Bildad back home. Both the retired captains are reluctant to leave.
* Even as they’re getting into the boat, Captain Peleg and Captain Bildad continue to give everyone advice and to wish them a good voyage.
* Then they sail away, and the *Pequod* is on its own in the vast Atlantic.

***Synopsis***:

The Pequod leaves Nantucket on a cold Christmas Day. Bildad and Peleg pilot the ship out of port. Ahab still has not appeared on deck. Ishmael finds the start of the voyage disconcerting and is meditating upon his situation when he receives a kick and a scolding from Peleg. The Pequod is soon clear of the harbor and into the open ocean, and Bildad and Peleg take a small boat back to shore as the whaling ship “plunge[s] like fate into the lone Atlantic.”

***Brief Analysis:***

[Peleg](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list#peleg) asks Starbuck whether everything is all right, and orders him to get Captain Ahab. Peleg gives orders to the crew, while [Bildad](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list#bildad) scolds the crew for profanity. Bildad paces about the deck, somewhat loath to leave the boat on such a long voyage. Peleg takes the departure more "like a philosopher," but despite this there is still some regret as he and Bildad board their boat and leave the Pequod for the shore as it sails out to sea.

The title of this novel is ironic, for it is the only significant mention of the holiday throughout the chapter; upon boarding the Pequod, such details as dates and holidays lose their significance as the crew removes themselves from normal society. Yet the characters Peleg and Bildad contribute to the notion that this removal from society is somewhat regrettable. Despite their return to the comforts of land, Bildad and Peleg are mournful that they must leave the Pequod.

***Analysis:***

"And, as for Captain Ahab, no sign of him was yet to be seen; only, they said he was in the cabin. But then, the idea was, that his presence was by no means necessary in getting the ship under weigh, and steering her well out to sea. Indeed, as that was not at all his proper business, but the pilot's ..." For most harbors, a specially licensed pilot is required to take the ships in and out. While captains are considered fine navigators on the open ocean, within the confines of a harbor, with other traffic, and shallower spots, a pilot specifically trained for that harbor is usually required by law.

Peleg says, "Well, call all hands, then. Muster 'em aft here--blast 'em!" and Bildad responds, "No need of profane words, however great the hurry, Peleg ..." But then later he cries out, "Aft here, ye sons of bachelors ..." so Bildad clearly has a very refined definition of what constitutes profanity. While we apply it to all sorts of "improper" language, in Melville's time, it appears to apply specifically to religious-based terminology, and "blast" was a synonym for "damn".

A capstan is "a mechanism for raising or lowering heavy weights [in this case the anchor] by winding cable around a vertically mounted spindle drum." A handspike is a bar used as a lever.

"And here Bildad, who, with Peleg, was one of the licensed pilots of the port--he being suspected to have got himself made a pilot in order to save the Nantucket pilot-fee to all the ships he was concerned in, for he never piloted any other craft ..." Here's another example of the penny-pinching that seems to have gone on.

The whalers "roared forth some sort of a chorus about the girls in Booble Alley." Booble Alley was also mentioned in Melville's Redburn. It was a street in Liverpool's red-light district.

"Charity, his sister, had placed a small choice copy of Watts in each seaman's berth." Isaac Watts was an English hymn writer from the early 18th century. It is not clear what particular work Charity placed there. Possibly it was Improvement of the Mind, which went through many editions in the early 19th century, though it could have been a collection of hymns.

When Peleg cries out, "Spring, ... Quohog! spring, thou chap with the red whiskers; spring there, Scotch-cap; spring, thou green pants," it seems clear that as mangled as he gets Queequeg's name, at least he has some notion that Queequeg has name, and what is sounds like. Everyone else is identified by whatever distinguishing visuals exist at the time, and "Scotch-cap" and "green pants" will almost definitely be unrecognizable to him after a change of clothes.

A windlass is similar to a capstan (see above), but is a horizontally mounted barrel rather than a vertical one.

The Pequod sails on Christmas Day. To some extent this indicates how disconnected it is from any considerations other than whaling--they do not delay even a day in order to celebrate Christmas. Many will also say this is merely the first of many indications that the Pequod will be abandoning "the Christian life" from a pagan existence. But it is also true that Christmas did not have the overwhelming significance in the early 19th century that it does now, and it was only with the rise of the social upheavals brought about by industrialization, transportation, and the Civil War that people started feeling the need for a major family holiday, and focused on Christmas. So at the time of the Pequod, it was becoming more popular, but was not yet the "stop-everything" holiday it has become.

Bildad sings, "Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood, Stand dressed in living green. So to the Jews old Canaan stood, While Jordan rolled between." This is one of Watts's hymns.

When Ishmael thinks of "meads and glades so eternally vernal" he is thinking of meadows and glades, not honey wine.

Bildad's advice is a mixture of thrift and religion: "Don't stave the boats needlessly, ye harpooneers; good white cedar plank is raised full three per cent. within the year. Don't forget your prayers, either. Mr. Starbuck, mind that cooper don't waste the spare staves. ... Don't whale it too much a' Lord's days, men; but don't miss a fair chance either, that's rejecting Heaven's good gifts." The last is a particularly fine touch, finding a rationale for breaking the prohibition against working on the Sabbath.

***Significance:***

Toward noon the riggers are dismissed and the Pequod sets sail—Captains Bildad and Peleg lead the ship out of port—they “were going it with a high hand on the [quarterdeck](http://patell.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/whaler_deck-620x388.jpg), just as if they were to be joint-commanders at sea”—still no sign of Captain Ahab, but he’s given the order to set sail—Ishmael still thinks it’s odd but not unheard of that Ahab would remain below deck while getting the ship under weigh—Peleg springs into action and begins shouting commands to the crew like a crazed man—”he seemed to do most of the talking and commanding, and not Bildad”—orders that the tent be struck (taken down), which order is “the next thing to heaving up the anchor”— Bildad sits back, “as pilot,” singing a strain of psalmody hearkening to warmer times in the midst of the freezing Christmas cast-off—he has declared “no profane songs” be allowed especially when first setting out—his sister, Charity, has placed [“a small choice copy of Watts in every seaman’s berth”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/22watts/)—Ishmael is working feverishly, when Peleg comes booming by and gives him a [#kick](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/chapter_summaries-home/chapter-summaries-part1/#kick) on his backside—“Is that the way they heave in the merchant service?”—With Peleg running all over the ship in “the most frightful manner” (“Captain Peleg,” thinks Ishmael, “must have been drinking something to-day.”), Ishmael’s last comfort is Bildad’s singing, “spite of his seven hundred and seventy-seventh lay”—[*Sweet fields beyond the sweeling flood, / Stand dressed in living green…*](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/22watts/)—the chapter closes with the reluctant departure from the *Pequod* of Captains Bildad and Peleg, who head back to Nantucket—Bildad seems to barely be able to stand leaving; Peleg takes it “more like a philosopher,” “but for all his philosophy, there was a tear twinkling in his eye”—Peleg wishes everyone luck; Bildad gives last minute instructions, re: the boats, sail needles, the butter, and don’t kill whales on the Sabbath unless it’s “a fair chance”—Ishmael is now under the care of the unseen Captain—a transition from the safety of land and structured guidance of Captain Bildad to the uncertain openness of the sea and Ahab—”we gave three heavy-hearted cheers, and blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic.”

***Important Quotations Explained:***

# **“A SMALL CHOICE COPY OF WATTS IN EVERY SEAMAN’S BERTH”**

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was a well-known English hymn writer and theologian. He is the author of many hymns that will be immediately recognized by a modern audience, such as “Joy to the World” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” Watts’s specific contribution to Protestant hymns was a style that took the traditional verse of the Bible and incorporated it with his own poetic rendering of his personal Christian experience. One of his aims was to “renovate” Old Testament Judaic Psalms to reflect New Testament Christian truths. In many of his hymns, like “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” Watts’s intention is to bring the “common man” of the congregation and the religious magnitude of symbols like the Cross closer together, to make spiritual truths more accessible.

In Chapter 22 of Moby-Dick, “Merry Christmas,” there is a reference to Captain Bildad’s sister Charity placing “a small choice copy” of one of Watts’s hymnals in each sailor’s berth (or bed), presumably to give the sailors an alternative to singing bawdy songs while they manage the ship. In fact, Bildad explicitly commands: “no profane songs would be allowed on the Pequod, particularly in getting under weigh.” The sailors do not heed Bildad, however, and “roared forth some sort of chorus about the girls in Booble Alley with hearty good will.” The sailors choose to sing about these women (who, one assumes, lack the sort of piety exemplified in Watts) rather than intone the hymns tucked away in their beds. Bildad, by contrast, does sing a Watts hymn, “There is A Land of Pure Delight,” while piloting the ship as it leaves port:

Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood,

Stand dressed in living green.

So to the Jews old Canaan stood,

While Jordan rolled between.

At the beginning of the Pequod’s voyage, the common sailors choose to remember the carnal, physical pleasures of Nantucket, while Bildad and his sister strive to preserve the hope of the “sweet fields” of heaven “beyond the swelling floods.” Ishmael represents the marriage of the two notions, much like Watts represents the marriage of Old Testament poetry and his own. Instead of remembering the spiritual in rejection of the carnal, or rejecting the spiritual in remembrance the carnal, Ishmael interprets Watts’s hymn (sung by Bildad) as the promise of a physical manifestation of “pleasant haven in store.”  He hopes that the whaling journey itself will lead to “meads and glades […] eternally vernal.” In all three cases, song (or the interpretation of song) renders the magnitude of the Pequod’s journey more accessible to the singer. The sailors face the great unknown while remembering the carnal pleasures of port; Bildad faces the physical unknown with his eyes on a spiritual certainty of heaven; Ishmael harbors hope that his first whaling voyage will reward him with “pleasant haven,” or heaven at sea. Like Watts, they all seek to make the incomprehensible, their own mortality in the face of the great unknown, comprehensible.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

It is Christmas Day when the Pequod pushes off from shore, and [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) reports that [Bildad](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) and [Peleg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) help to guide the vessel from port, as “pilots,” before leaving the Pequod and getting onto another vessel, to take them back to Nantucket while the Pequod heads out into the open Atlantic. Ishmael hears tell of, and sees, [Starbuck](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/starbuck), the first mate, [Stubb](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), the second, and [Flask](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), the third, and he bustles along with the rest of the crew in preparing the boat for its long voyage. Bildad is loath to leave the Pequod and board the return ship to the port, but Peleg finally convinces him—after Bildad spends some minutes worrying atop the deck, pacing—that it’s time to go. Bildad and Peleg then leave the Pequod in the command of Starbuck, while [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab) remains below-deck, hidden from view.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Melville makes a point of having the Pequod begin its journey on Christmas Day. Christmas, of course, apart from being an important Christian celebration and a day of nearly guaranteed rest across the country, is also a day of new beginnings, of the start of Jesus’ life. Similarly, the Pequod is about to start a multi-year journey across the oceans of the world. But unlike the birth of Jesus, the shipping-out of the Pequod is tinged with a kind of brooding darkness, as exemplified by Ahab’s “hiding” until the ship is well out of port.