

The Nantucket Sleigh Ride

Historical Short Fiction

4,400 Words

Third Mate Richard Camden shouted over the creaking oars and chopping waves. “Pull, you lot, pull! Pull with your prayers! Pull with your souls! Pull for your hungry wives and babes. A silver—” His voice cracked. He sat taller and drew in his belly to ease the tension on the buttons of his new topcoat. “A silver dollar for a broken oar! Meat from the captain’s plate. Pull, now, pull!” He nodded to himself. *That sounded better.*

He squinted to measure the froth behind the fleeing sperm whale a league ahead. They were on their own now: two sister harpoon boats gone after their own prey and the sails of the *Moira* far behind. But the beast’s spouts were coming faster. Its strength was nearly spent.

The sun hung just above the horizon, and the water around the twenty-foot skiff had darkened. Luminescent algae glowed in the whale’s track. He checked his boat’s wake. They had slowed since the midday launch from the *Moira* just moments after spotters sang out from the mastheads, but his men would pull through the night if he asked, pull across the heavens on his words. He was an officer now.

He fixed the tiller in the crook of one arm and used his ruffled shirt cuffs to dry the sea spray from his forehead. His fingers traced and measured his hairline; it seemed no further back than the day before. In the distance, a few clouds lay scribbled like a signature near the gunflint-blue line of the sea. The whale’s flukes rose in silhouette and sunk from view.

Mr. Wirther, the harpooner, looked over his shoulder, then pushed the handle of his oar down to his feet. The paddle splashed up and hung in the air, dripping. He was a massive old salt who had thrown for the *Moira's* previous captain as well. Despite his age, he could still row for eight hours, then land an iron in a monster.

“Tuck that oar in!” Camden yelled.

Wirther's back arched with his breaths. Sweat dripped from his grizzled beard. “But them's flukes, sir. He's heading down.”

“Tuck in, Mr. Wirther, or there'll be hell to pay. Upon my soul!”

Wirther brought his paddle down into the swinging rhythm, a rhythm much slower than before.

Camden slapped the tiller. “What's this? Pull, you lot, pull!”

He kept them going until he realized they were overshooting their catch.

“Oars up, gentleman,” he said. “Breathe easy, now.”

The men slumped. Oarlocks rattled and stilled. Ten bare backs heaved in near unison.

Camden tugged his watch from his breast pocket and noted the time and his direction with the sun. He took a pipe and tinderbox from a pouch beside the pistol in his belt. The pipe's hardwood bowl was still warm from the whale's last dive. The beast wouldn't be down long this time.

He tried to pop a match with his thumbnail, something he'd been working on since his third mate examinations a month ago. All the officers lit their pipes that way. His first attempt sputtered out. Thankfully the oarsmen were still hunched over panting and no one noticed. His second attempt rewarded him with a flame, and he puffed the Chilean tobacco to life.

He closed his eyes for a moment to savor the taste. Despite his good family name, he'd spent the last seventeen years watching the mates on the quarterdeck smoke prime leaf while he'd contented himself with the same cheap Virginian blend as the rest of the unlicensed seamen. *Not anymore.* Upon taking command of the *Moira*, their new Captain Wilhem had at last let him test. Camden glanced behind to see if the ship's sails had come into view. Empty sea.

Ten minutes later, the whale blew off to starboard less than a quarter-mile away. Camden knocked his pipe clean on his seat-board. "Turn out, gentlemen. Play his game. Tag his tail!" Oars smashed into the water, and he hauled the tiller against his thigh to steer into the glowing trail. Horizontal sunrays flared over the sweating shoulders of his crew. "Aye, he's a giant, boys. More oil than a thousand others. You'll each have a New York mansion. Captain Wilhem's fresh, young wife will serve you breakfast on trays. She'll wash your asses with silk! Pull!"

The exhausted whale's tail broke the water with each swipe. Camden ran over the wake to come up along the beast's side, but his angle was too shallow, and the boat rocked violently. The harpooner's head came up in alarm.

"No time to bank deeper, gentlemen," Camden called. "We're right on him. Now to, Mr. Wirther."

The harpooner scooped his oar out of its lock and dumped it in the center of the boat, then pushed to his feet, his bulk pitching everyone forward. A rope box in the bow also held the harpoons. He pulled one of the shafts free and fed it through the skiff's iron bow ring, then hefted it to his shoulder and tugged the rope tied to its end to test the knot. Barbed metal glistened under salted spray.

The whale crashed high through the swells. When it slowed to study the boat with an absurdly tiny eye, Wirther cast and struck two yards behind the unblinking orb.

The beast pulled away, and the line screamed through the ring. Wirther twisted a small loop into the slack, waited until they were clear of the flukes, then flipped it over the ring. The line snapped tight, and the boat lurched forward. A trough of water dumped over its fore.

“We’re off, lads!” Camden yelled. “Off to Nantucket on the finest of sleighs. Oars up. Make him do the work!”

Foamy splashes soaked his face and ascot. He freed the top button of his coat and scooped his lance from the plank floor. Its long, tapered point knocked against the gunwale as he hummed to himself and took the chops in his knees. Ahead, the massive tail rose from the water, almost as wide as the boat was long. “Unhitch him, Mr. Wirther! He’s sounding again!”

The harpooner had already unwrapped the line, and it was running through the ring so fast it smoked. He bailed water onto it as the skiff angled downward. “Need the other line, sir. He gonna run this one out.”

“No,” Camden said. “Save it to for a second iron. He couldn’t have taken a good breath. He . . .”

The rope sizzled. The boat tipped further. Camden arched backward over the tiller.

“Sir?” Wirther said.

“Right, then. Go ahead. I’ve chased him this long.”

Wirther yanked his sea-knife from his hemp belt and cut the rope from the second harpoon. His meaty hands moved with calloused speed to tie the end of the first line to the start of the second with a four-looped knot. He lined it up with the bow ring and waited. A minute passed. The knot snapped through the metal circle with a jolt that made the boat hump. He scooped more water on the ring.

Four bails later, the rope slackened and the boat rocked upright. The motion threw Camden onto the shoulders of the men in front of him. Wirther rode it with ballroom ease. The whale surfaced to larboard and blew a weak spray.

“Pull!” Camden yelled. “Put me on him!”

He steered toward the kill while the harpooner scooped the line into the boat. As they gained the beast’s side, the slack ran out. Wirther twisted another loop over the bow ring, and the boat again jerked forward under the whale’s power. “Ready, sir!” he called. “He’s yours!”

Third Mate and harpooner stumbled through the oarsmen to swap places. Camden wedged a knee between the gunwale and the galley box and raised his lance to his shoulder. “Now to!” He plunged the shaft into the wall of mottled gray flesh beside them, yanked it out, and struck again—it jolted against bone. He yanked it out, smacked it on the gunwale to straighten it, and sank it again. Blood pulsed from the two-inch-wide holes. Red foam geysered from the whale’s spout to settle over everyone in the boat. Camden wiped a sleeve across his eyes and struck again; then again, this time angling forward, deep toward the life force. The beast veered away, dragging the boat against its side.

“Give’m play, sir!” Wirther called from the tiller. The skiff bounced and shuddered along the whale’s side. “Free the hitch, sir! Give’m play!”

Now? Why?

“Free the hitch, sir!” Wirther yelled.

Camden reached for the bouncing line, then stopped. *No! I give the orders here!*

He turned and landed his iron again, sunk it with a twist, and yanked it out. The beast banked harder, pulling them behind it and beneath its giant tail. Eleven men looked up in

shadow. Rain from the flukes pattered onto their faces. Camden dove over the side. The crash of the tail on the skiff thumped through the water behind him.

Swirling froth. Muted screams.

He surfaced and choked in a gulp of air, flailing with one hand, clutching the lance with the other. The flukes rose, wavered, then smashed down again, driving the boat under. The screams stopped. Camden wiped the water from his eyes and blew it from his nose.

The sea calmed, and the whale rolled slowly, the weight of the sunken boat on the line keeping it from going fully to its back. Blood and vomit heaved from its mouth to mix with the glowing algae. An exposed flipper slapped forward.

Camden swam to the harpoon jutting from the carcass a foot out of the water and grabbed hold. He rode the swells for a time to catch his breath and slow his heart.

Am I alone? He pulled himself up to see farther. *Alone out here?*

“Ho there!” he called. Water lapped into his mouth. He spat and coughed, then pulled himself up on the harpoon to drive in his lance a foot above it. Using the two shafts as steps, he climbed onto the rocking fish. The blubber beneath him gave only an inch or two.

“Ho there! Anyone!” He stood and squinted left, right, left again. “Ho there!”

“Here, sir,” Mr. Wirther’s voice called from near the whale’s head. “And two with me.”

A Polynesian oarsman, wide-eyed and gasping, hauled himself up on the lance. Camden rushed forward, then stopped and straightened his coat over his belly. His men needed strong leadership now more than ever. The skeletal man slid onto the whale, nearly losing his wool trousers. He shook his head wildly when motioned to stand.

“Silly child,” Camden said. “But God has spared you . . . you must be worth something. At the least sit up and survey your prize.”

A second native crawled aboard. He looked twice the weight of his tribesman—a more hardy conscript. The two savages clasped tanned arms and whispered in their barbarian tongue.

Wirther's full moon face rose above the lance, and the carcass rocked sunward. Camden fell forward. He yanked his knife from his belt and stabbed it into the blubber to keep from sliding off. "Careful, you idiot!" he cried to the harpooner. "You may be too big."

Wirther climbed aboard and stood. "He's holding right fine, sir. A grand fish."

Camden joined him. Even at full stretch he barely reached the harpooner's chin. Gas churned in the whale's core. It passed beneath them before surfacing in a gout of sour bubbles from the mouth. The body settled in the water, and most of the head sunk out of sight. Camden raked the sea with his eyes. His fingertips traced the edges of his hairline. Was there no one else?

Seven souls lost?

He cleared his throat and freed his shirt cuffs from his coat sleeves. *Strength. His men needed strength.* He clapped Wirther on a big, round shoulder. "A fine story this will make in Pike's Pub. Surely destined for Nantucket legend. This fish has taken our boat but offers his oil and a ride home in kind."

"We all that's left, sir?" Wirther said.

Camden looked out over the water.

"Sir?" Wirther said. "We all that's left?"

Seven souls. Seven souls on my watch.

Camden shook his head. "Save your grief. For now, we hold fast and wait for the *Moira*."

"But we got no lanterns, sir." Wirther pointed to the taut line that stretched down from the end of the harpoon. "They sunk in the boat. How the *Moira* to find us tonight with no lanterns?"

A swell rocked the whale. The Polynesians yelped and stabbed their knives into the blubber. Camden and Wirther stretched out their arms but remained standing.

“Well then,” Camden said. “we’ll see out the night here, then fill women’s ears with our tale later in every port from here to New Bedford.”

“Don’t want no women, sir. Want a lantern for the *Moira* to see.”

With slow, deliberate movements Camden tucked in his ascot and re-buttoned his collar. He leveled a finger at the harpooner. “You will ease your tongue, Mr. Wirther, or have it cut it from your mouth. Mistake me no longer for some simpleton jack. I am a third mate of Captain Wilhem of the *Nantucket Moira*.”

Wirther sat and squeezed the water from his beard. “Aye, sir.”

The two Polynesians sat up cautiously beside him.

Camden paced the edges of his island of flesh and scanned the darkening horizons for the *Moira*. Nothing but level sea and a half-soaked sun. His shadow stretched over smooth waves.

He pulled his pipe from its pouch, shook it dry, and packed it with tobacco from the waterproof tinderbox. It took three of his six remaining matches to pop one with his thumb, but he no longer cared if the others were watching. They certainly couldn’t do it.

He remained standing until full dark, then squatted near his men.

“Turn in, lads. Tomorrow, we’ll sing of this night to our mates.”

He yanked his knife from the whale and plunged it back in to pin the tail of his coat to the blubber. An arm beneath his head, he closed his eyes.

The smell of brine and oil and musk was strong but not unpleasant. It was the smell of fortune, of success. The carcass rocked gently, much like the *Moira* in a windless port.

Until the sharks arrived.

Shudders rippled through the whale's flesh. At one point the whole body rotated as something huge smashed into its head. Camden sat up in the moonless night, unable to see anything but the stars.

"Take what you wish!" he yelled. "Come dawn, each bite will cost you . . . and you'll reckon for tonight's meal as well!" He spat into the blackness. "Eat up!"

Listening to the feeding below, he fell back asleep.

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The sun had snuck into the sky while Camden lay half awake. He stumbled to his feet and looked for his ship. Nothing. He kicked the harpooner and the two oarsmen with his heel. "Up, gentlemen. We've work to do." The Polynesians blinked in the light. Wirther coughed for a second on all fours before rising.

Sharks writhed in packs around the carcass. Camden thumbed his trousers open and smiled as his stream pattered onto their heads.

"Can't stop the bastards beneath," he said, tucking himself away and tugging his coat straight, "but those on the surface will pay."

He motioned the Polynesians to stand back to back to watch for the *Moira* while he and the harpooner dealt with the sharks. He gave Wirther the tail of his coat and edged down the side of the carcass to free his lance.

Each beast, large or small, took only a few stabs through the center of its skull before drifting away in a deepening spiral. Some died with their jaws imbedded in the whale and had to be pried loose. Only a few realized they were under attack and snapped at the lance, their eyes bowling backward.

It made for boring sport, and for every one sent to the depths, another pushed in. By mid-afternoon, the men had to rest. Wirther's muscled torso shone with sweat. The Polynesians sat on the flipper but still watched the horizons.

Camden removed his coat and unbuttoned his gossamer shirt. He questioned the natives' diligence with a raised eyebrow. *Why hadn't they spotted the ship?*

"We gonna see another night for sure, sir," Wirther said. "If we had us a lantern, the *Moira*, she'd find us even better in the dark."

Camden swallowed what little saliva remained in his mouth and wiped the back of his hand across his salt-cured lips. "A lantern? There's a fine idea. Have you one in your ass?"

"See that line, sir? It's pulling this fish hard over. I say there's still a boat on the end of it, and a lantern in her galley box."

Camden sought patience from the cloudless heavens. "Even you don't have that kind of strength. Half that boat would take a dozen men to raise."

"Ain't talking about raising, sir. Talking about swimming."

Camden laughed up into the man's face. He laughed long and hard until no trace of humor remained in the sounds, just harsh barks amid spittle. He took the harpooner's thick wrist and led him to the edge. "I realize your lack of station, but you might have noticed how we spent our day." He pointed at the churning mass. "You see . . . those are sharks. And they will eat you should you choose to play with them."

"Sir, them sharks are busy with this grand supper. They won't care about no scrap like me, less I bump right on one."

Camden dropped the man's arm. "Nonsense. You talk of suicide. We'll be found soon enough. And if we're not, then we'll die like gentlemen. Nobly. You'll not feed yourself to those

monsters. No one may deny Our Father of His ultimate responsibility or Captain Wilhem of his crew. You may write your will, but you'll not discard your life."

"Can't write, sir. Don't want no will. Want a lantern."

"You forget yourself, Mr. Wirther."

"But there's a lantern down there. Mayhap a canteen too."

"Enough, I say!"

"No offense I'm sure, sir. Just a fast line. See how this fish here is listing? That line is pulling him over. The boat's—"

Camden yanked his pistol from his belt and held it at his side. "Your soul is in my keeping, and suicide is a sin. If we die, it will be proper. We will comb our hair and shine our buttons—"

"Ain't got no buttons, sir."

Camden cocked the pistol. "Taking your own life is a sin, Mr. Wirther. Being shot for mutiny is not."

The Polynesians stared at the weapon. The harpooner looked from it to the line. He blew a breath with puffed cheeks and lowered his head. "Aye, sir."

Camden uncocked the pistol and tucked it back in his belt. He gave the lance to the bigger of the two natives and shoved him toward Wirther. "I'll hear no more. Now, feed those monsters some more iron with their meat."

As the two seamen worked and the third watched the surrounding ocean, Camden tended to his pistol, wiping down each piece with his sleeve before laying it on his folded coat to dry in the sun. It wouldn't have fired—the powder was still wet—but only he knew that. He had to keep his uneducated men from doing anything foolish before they were rescued. A third mate's

duties included the preservation of the crew's safety under sail as well as in port. He'd received high marks in that section of his examinations and would surely hear the praises of his captain upon their return.

But I lost seven souls.

The wind strengthened at nightfall. His tinderbox now held just three matches. He half-filled his pipe and popped one. It crackled but didn't light. He popped a second, and this time filled his lungs and head with the smoke.

"Good tobacco on a starlit sea is matched only by virgin love," he told his men. It was something Captain Wilhem had said a few nights ago after dinner.

He leaned back on his hands and blew through his nose to burn out the smell of the aging flesh beneath him. His whale was lower in the water—his island losing ground. Around him, the sharks fought in the darkness. Such sloppy eaters, they didn't deserve the offerings from so fine a fish. But whatever they left behind would soon be worthless anyway. By tomorrow, any rotten oil boiled from it would be unfit for all but the poorest and coldest of homes.

He blew a smoke ring and counted the stars within it. Where was the *Moira*? Surely the captain would search for someone he'd just found worthy enough to promote.

Seven souls.

No sleep came that night. The lowest stars curved up and arced down. The three men with him breathed heavily. Sharks snapped and splashed.

* * *

Men shouted. Sunlight burned through his closed eyelids. A shadow covered him.

"Sir . . . sir!" Wither's voice.

Camden pushed himself up and out of his coat, leaving it pinned to the whale with his knife. His head swam with the effort. The two natives were arguing. The small one had a foot on the harpoon and was scooping water from the swells near the line. The other was struggling with him to keep him from drinking it. Both were oblivious to the sharks inches away.

Camden stepped toward them, then hunched over his knees and retched. A hand touched his shoulder. He looked up at his harpooner. “What?”

“Sir, they’re powerful thirsty.”

“And I’m not?”

“I beg you, let me go for that canteen. And for that lantern.”

Camden shoved the hand away and lurched to his feet. “Silence!”

The natives froze. Wirther looked at the line, then back at Camden. “Sir, I’m going.”

“No, you’re not!” Drinking seawater, swimming with monsters—his men were failing! He had to hold them together. “You *will* obey me.”

“But if I’m to die, I choose to take my chances with them sharks there.”

“That choice is not yours to make!”

“Beg your pardon, Richard, but ain’t yours neither.”

Camden drew his pistol and aimed at the man’s chest. “Upon my soul, you will not address me so informal. I am your master now!”

The natives rose in front of them, hands outstretched for peace. Wirther yanked the lance free and gave it to the larger man, motioning him to smack the sharks away from the line.

Camden cocked the pistol. “Stop!”

Wirther stepped between the two natives, hands coming up for the dive. “All of you be ready,” he said, his eyes on the growing hole among the sharks. “When I got what I want, I’m

gonna cut that line. Without the boat pulling him over, this fish gonna roll hard and pull me up, so you hold fast.”

“Stop, I say!”

Wirther dove. The carcass pitched. Camden fired.

The ball thudded into the larger Polynesian’s back, and the lance flew from the man’s hands. He fell sidelong onto the sharks, and the beasts ripped into his flesh in a tumult of splashes and screams.

Camden watched the frenzy through a cloud of blue smoke, his pistol quivering. The remaining native screamed, drew his knife, charged. The thrust into Camden’s gut came more as pressure than pain. He cracked the butt of his gun against the savage’s head. The man stumbled overboard into the churning water, and his shrieks joined those of his tribesman before disappearing into bubbles. Camden moaned and slumped to his knees.

The knife handle jutted from the side of his abdomen. He grabbed it, then forced himself to let go. He knew better: if he pulled it out, he’d bleed to death.

He gagged and spat a bloody wad in front of him. His head rocked back, eyes closed.

Ten souls gone now. My entire command.

He brought his face down and stared at his lap. Blood was seeping into his tobacco pouch. With a grunt, he freed his pipe and tinderbox. His last match popped to life on the first try, and he brought flame and leaf together with shaking hands.

A weak cough after his first puff made his vision blur. When he could see again, he held up the pipe. Tendrils of smoke curled from the bowl like accusing fingers.

Ten souls.

He dropped his hand and let the pipe slide down the whale's side to sink among the sharks.

With a heaving splash, the whale carcass rose and turned, finishing its death roll. Camden cried out and clutched a sleeve of his pinned coat to stay aboard his spinning world. Opposite him, Wirther rode up through the ring of sharks, a sliced end of the harpoon line in one fist, his knife in the other. He dug in the blade and lay gasping, toes just out of the water.

Hanging from a wire loop around his elbow was a lantern, glass broken, brass base intact. Two tin canteens dangled from his neck, clanking. He crawled up through sodden, chewed blubber and shook the lantern in front of his face. Oil sloshed inside. "Now they find us! They find us tonight for sure!"

A lantern. Wirther had a lantern!

Camden felt for his tinderbox. Gone. No more matches in it anyway. He gagged again, tried to swallow the blood that rose, coughed it out instead.

The harpooner's satisfied smile faded at the sight of the knife in Camden's side. "What happened?" He dropped the lantern and shuffled forward on his knees. "Where them other two? What did they do?" The canteens swung between them. Wirther twisted out the cork of one and lifted the water to Camden's mouth. "What did they do?"

Camden's body shivered at the touch of the cool liquid on his lips, but he turned his face away.

Ten souls.

He'd failed them all. His men deserved better than him. His captain deserved better than him. His family, his ship, even his whale deserved better than him.

The lantern lay smeared in rotten blubber. Chilean tobacco fouled the air. The horizon remained empty of sails.

His Maker deserved better than him.

He gripped the knife with both hands and pulled it out.

The End