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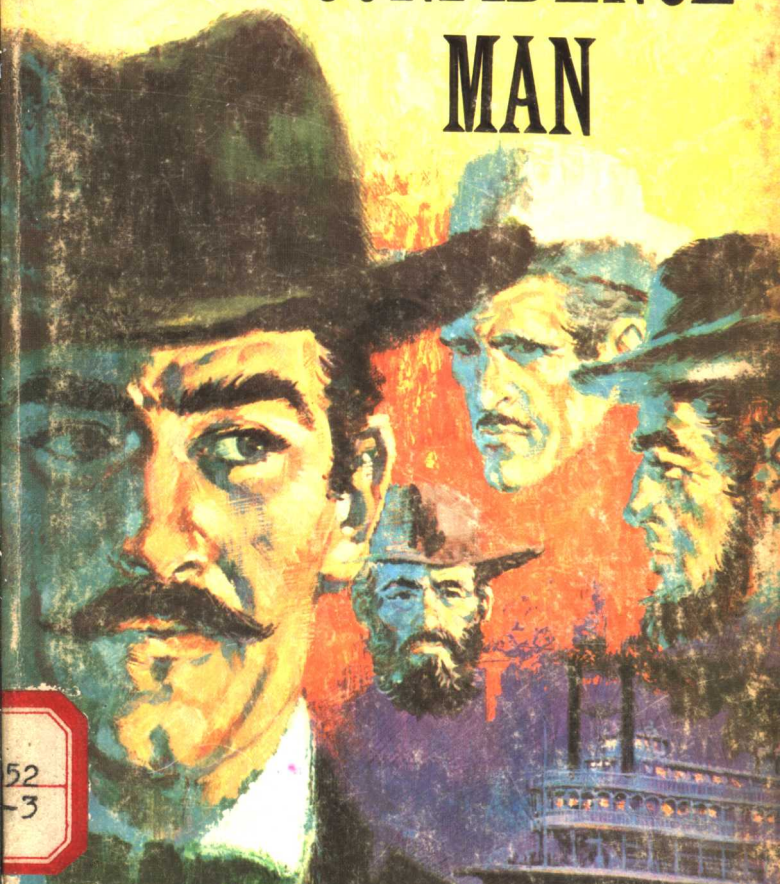
HERMAN MELVILLE

THE CONFIDENCE MAN



Introduction by John Grube

Complete and Unabridged

THE CONFIDENCE MAN

HERMAN MELVILLE

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HERMAN MELVILLE

Introduction

HERMAN MELVILLE was best known to his contemporaries, as he is known to the general public today, as a teller of sea stories. The point of departure for these "sailors' yarns" was his own experience on the high seas, as it has been for other writers such as Richard Henry Dana and Joseph Conrad.

Born in New York in 1819 into a family of distinguished origins but little money, Melville had to leave school and go to work at the age of thirteen on the death of his father. After a variety of unsatisfactory jobs, he decided to go to sea, not as an "escape" but as a way of earning a living. His first trip took him to Liverpool in 1839; his most important voyage, as far as providing him with materials for his later writings is concerned, started in 1841, when he signed on for a three-year tour of duty with the whaling ship, the *Acushnet*. He was, for a time, also a sailor in the United States Navy. His first two novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*, are based on his observations of the idyllic life on the then unspoiled islands of the South Pacific. They were a great success, and this encouraged Melville to persevere as a professional writer. But his subsequent novels, such as *Moby Dick*, were not simply adventure stories; they were permeated with deep philosophical insights and attacks on the restrictive religious, moral, and social codes of the time. This found a mixed reaction—and declining sales. Gradually his ability to earn a living and support a family by writing vanished; he took a job as Inspector of Customs and led a perfectly respectable middle-

class life until his death in 1891. In the last year of his life, he wrote an excellent novel, *Billy Budd,* which had to wait until 1924 to find a publisher. It is only in the last forty years that Melville has come into his own both with the general public and with literary critics.

It was a trip to visit his uncle in Galena, Illinois, in 1840—then very nearly a frontier town—that gave Melville the basic background material for *The Confidence Man.* It is his last novel before quitting the active literary life, and in it are contained some of his most acute comments, in humorous rather than tragic form, on the human predicament. Previously, his stories had been outward-bound: *The Confidence Man* takes us to the Middle Western heartland of America, which Melville realized would supersede New England as the continent's dominant economic and cultural pattern.

The action takes place aboard a Mississippi steamboat, the *Fidèle:*

> As among Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims . . . there was no lack of variety. Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlour men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, buffalo-hunters, bee-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth-hunters, and still keener hunters after these hunters. Fine ladies in slippers, and moccasined squaws; Northern speculators and Eastern philosophers; English, Irish, German, Scotch, Danes . . . grinning negroes and Sioux chiefs solemn as high-priests.

In short, the steamboat is America, or perhaps the world itself, and contains every possible variety of person. Among these circulates the "confidence man," a swindler who takes on various shapes and disguises during the course of the voyage: a crippled Negro, a promoter of shares in the Black Rapids Coal Company, a fund-raiser for the Seminole Orphans Home, an employment agent, and a spurious philosopher. Because the confidence man succeeds in duping most people he approaches, Melville calls the *Fidèle,* at one point, "a ship of fools."

The book is not a tight structure with a gripping narrative; it is a cheerful, rambling series of episodes with plenty of editorial comment thrown in. Essentially it is a group of those "tall tales," well-known then as now to be the basis of humor in the American West, bound together by the theme of "confidence" which, of course, has a double meaning. On the one hand, the "confidence man" fleeces many victims; on the other, Melville is perfectly well aware that "confidence" is essential in

any human activity, whether running a ship, keeping a classroom in order, or maintaining the "business confidence" without which no community can prosper. It is for this reason that the book will touch each reader at a different point, depending on his experience. Let me take a personal example. I worked for five years for an employment agency, so the double-talk used by the employment agent of the Philosophical Intelligence Office sounds pretty familiar. Instead of "phrenological" charts, we used sophisticated psychological testing; instead of buying drinks on a Mississippi steamboat, we took clients to three-martini luncheons at a smart hotel. On the other hand, employment agents do quite often find the right job for people who are square pegs in round holes. It is this essentially ambiguous quality of all human activity that Melville wishes us to consider. Today, of course, the associates of the Philosophical Intelligence Office would call themselves "consultants."

Perhaps the most brilliant piece of writing in the book is the caricature of Emerson as "Mark Winsome" and his disciple, Thoreau, as "Egbert." Although we know from Melville's letters that he had a deep respect for the quality of Emerson's mind, the Emersonian philosophy built up on the New England virtues of thrift and self-reliance (rather than charity) Melville rejected as frigid and unChristian. He valued the "heart of man." At one point in the novel, as he is passing from "the comedy of thought to that of action," Melville ironically notes that "the more earnest psychologists may, in the face of previous failures, still cherish expectations with regard to some mode of infallibly discovering the heart of man." Melville cherished no such illusions.

The Confidence Man is a "masquerade." It is a masquerade of the public faces we all present to the world. The last sentence of the novel, "Something further may follow of this Masquerade," indicates Melville's belief that the human comedy will persist as long as man himself.

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Chapter I A Mute Goes Aboard a Boat on the Mississippi

At sunrise on a first of April, there appeared, suddenly as Manco Capac at the lake Titicaca, a man in cream-colors, at the water-side in the city of St. Louis.

His cheek was fair, his chin downy, his hair flaxen, his hat a white fur one, with a long fleecy nap. He had neither trunk, valise, carpet-bag, nor parcel. No porter followed him. He was unaccompanied by friends. From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd, it was plain that he was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger.

In the same moment with his advent, he stepped aboard the favourite steamer *Fidèle*, on the point of starting for New Orleans. Stared at, but unsaluted, with the air of one neither courting nor shunning regard, but evenly pursuing the path of duty, lead it through solitudes or cities, he held on his way along the lower deck until he chanced to come to a placard nigh the captain's office, offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East; quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear, though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given; but what purported to be a careful description of his person followed.

As if it had been a theatre-bill crowds were gathered about the announcement, and among them certain chevaliers, whose eyes, it was plain, were on the capitals, or, at least, earnestly seeking sight of them from behind intervening coats; but as for their fingers, they were enveloped in some myth; though, during a chance interval, one of these chevaliers somewhat showed his hand in purchasing from another chevalier, *ex-officio* a peddler of money-belts, one of his popular safeguards, while another peddler, who was still another versatile chevalier, hawked, in the thick of the throng, the lives of Measan, the bandit of Ohio, Murrel, the pirate of the Mississippi, and the brothers Harpe, the Thugs of the Green River country, in Kentucky—creatures, with others of the sort, one and all exterminated at the time, and for the most part, like the hunted generations of wolves in the same regions, leaving comparatively few successors; which would seem cause for unalloyed gratulation, and is such to all except those who think that in new countries, where the wolves are killed off, the foxes increase.

Pausing at this spot, the stranger so far succeeded in threading his way, as at last to plant himself just beside the placard,

when, producing a small slate and tracing some words upon it, he held it up before him on a level with the placard; so that they who read the one might read the other. The words were these:

"Charity thinketh no evil."

As, in gaining his place, some little perseverance, not to say persistence of a mildly inoffensive sort, had been unavoidable, it was not with the best relish that the crowd regarded his apparent intrusion; and upon a more attentive survey, perceiving no badge of authority about him, but rather something quite the contrary—he being of an aspect so singularly innocent; an aspect, too, which they took to be somehow inappropriate to the time and place, and inclining to the notion that his writing was of much the same sort: in short, taking him for some strange kind of simpleton, harmless enough, would he keep to himself, but not wholly unobnoxious as an intruder—they made no scruple to jostle him aside; while one, less kind than the rest, or more of a wag, by an unobserved stroke, dexterously flattened down his fleecy hat upon his head. Without readjusting it, the stranger quietly turned, and writing anew upon the slate, again held it up:

"Charity suffereth long, and is kind."

Illy pleased with his pertinacity, as they thought it, the crowd a second time thrust him aside, and not without epithets and some buffets, all of which were unresented. But, as if at last despairing of so difficult an adventure, wherein one, apparently, a non-resistant, sought to impose his presence upon fighting characters, the stranger now moved slowly away, yet not before altering his writing to this:

"Charity endureth all things."

Shield-like bearing his slate before him, amid stares and jeers he moved slowly up and down, at his turning-points again changing his inscription to:

"Charity believeth all things."

and then:

"Charity never faileth."

The word charity, as originally traced, remained throughout uneffaced, not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank.

To some observers, the singularity, if not lunacy, of the stranger was heightened by his muteness, and, perhaps also, by the contrast to his proceedings afforded in the actions—quite in

the wonted and sensible order of things—of the barber of the boat, whose quarters, under a smoking-saloon, and over against a barroom, was next door but two to the captain's office. As if the long, wide, covered deck, hereabouts built up on both sides with shop-like windowed spaces, were some Constantinople arcade or bazaar, where more than one trade is plied, this river barber, aproned and slippered, but rather crusty-looking for the moment, it may be from being newly out of bed, was throwing open his premises for the day, and suitably arranging the exterior. With business-like dispatch, having rattled down his shutters, and at a palm-tree angle set out in the iron fixture his little ornamental pole, and this without overmuch tenderness for the elbows and toes of the crowd, he concluded his operations by bidding people stand still more aside, when, jumping on a stool, he hung over his door, on the customary nail, a gaudy sort of illuminated pasteboard sign, skilfully executed by himself, gilt with the likeness of a razor elbowed in readiness to shave, and also, for the public benefit, with two words not unfrequently seen ashore gracing other shops besides barbers':

"No Trust"

An inscription which, though in a sense not less intrusive than the contrasted ones of the stranger, did not, as it seemed, provoke any corresponding derision or surprise, much less indignation; and still less, to all appearances, did it gain for the inscriber the repute of being a simpleton.

Meanwhile, he with the slate continued moving slowly up and down, not without causing some stares to change into jeers, and some jeers into pushes, and some pushes into punches; when suddenly, in one of his turns, he was hailed from behind by two porters carrying a large trunk; but as the summons, though loud, was without effect, they accidentally or otherwise swung their burden against him, nearly overthrowing him; when, by a quick start, a peculiar inarticulate moan, and a pathetic telegraphing of his fingers, he involuntarily betrayed that he was not alone dumb, but also deaf.

Presently, as if not wholly unaffected by his reception thus far, he went forward, seating himself in a retired spot on the forecastle, nigh the foot of a ladder there leading to a deck above, up and down which ladder some of the boatmen, in discharge of their duties, were occasionally going.

From his betaking himself to this humble quarter, it was evident that, as a deck-passenger, the stranger, simple though he seemed, was not entirely ignorant of his place, though his taking a deck-passage might have been partly for convenience; as, from his having no luggage, it was probable that his destination was one of the small wayside landings within a few hours' sail.

But, though he might not have a long way to go, yet he seemed already to have come from a very long distance.

Though neither soiled nor slovenly, his cream-colored suit had a tossed look, almost linty, as if, traveling night and day from some far country beyond the prairies, he had long been without the solace of a bed. His aspect was at once gentle and jaded, and, from the moment of seating himself, increasing in tired abstraction and dreaminess. Gradually overtaken by slumber, his flaxen head drooped, his whole lamb-like figure relaxed, and, half reclining against the ladder's foot, lay motionless, as some sugar-snow in March, which, softly stealing down over night, with its white placidity startles the brown farmer peering out from his threshold at daybreak.

Chapter 2 *Showing that Many Men Have Many Minds*

"Odd fish!"

"Poor fellow!"

"Who can he be?"

"Casper Hauser."

"Bless my soul!"

"Uncommon countenance."

"Green prophet from Utah."

"Humbug!"

"Singular innocence."

"Means something."

"Spirit-rapper."

"Moon-calf."

"Piteous."

"Trying to enlist interest."

"Beware of him."

"Fast asleep here, and, doubtless, pick-pockets on board."

"Kind of daylight Endymion."

"Escaped convict, worn out with dodging."

"Jacob dreaming at Luz."

Such the epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought, of a miscellaneous company, who, assembled on the overlooking, cross-wise balcony at the forward end of the upper deck near by, had not witnessed preceding occurrences.

Meantime, like some enchanted man in his grave, happily oblivious of all gossip, whether chiselled or chatted, the deaf and

dumb stranger still tranquilly slept, while now the boat started on her voyage.

The great ship-canal of Ving-King-Ching, in the Flowery Kingdom, seems the Mississippi in parts, where, amply flowing between low, vine-tangled banks, flat as tow-paths, it bears the huge toppling steamers, bedizened and lacquered within like imperial junks.

Pierced along its great white bulk with two tiers of small embrasure-like windows, well above the water-line, the *Fidèle*, though, might at distance have been taken by strangers for some whitewashed fort on a floating isle.

Merchants on 'change seem the passengers that buzz on her decks, while, from quarters unseen, comes a murmur as of bees in the comb. Fine promenades, domed saloons, long galleries, sunny balconies, confidential passages, bridal chambers, staterooms plenty as pigeon-holes, and out-of-the-way retreats like secret drawers in an escritoire, present like facilities for publicity or privacy. Auctioneer or coiner, with equal ease, might somewhere here drive his trade.

Though her voyage of twelve hundred miles extends from apple to orange, from clime to clime, yet, like any small ferry-boat, to right and left, at every landing, the huge *Fidèle* still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange; like Rio Janeiro fountain, fed from the Cocovarde mountains, which is ever overflowing with strange waters, but never with the same strange particles in every part.

Though hitherto, as has been seen, the man in cream-colors had by no means passed unobserved, yet by stealing into retirement, and there going asleep and continuing so, he seemed to have courted oblivion, a boon not often withheld from so humble an applicant as he. Those staring crowds on the shore were now left far behind, seen dimly clustering like swallows on eaves; while the passengers' attention was soon drawn away to the rapidly shooting high bluffs and shot-towers on the Missouri shore, or the bluff-looking Missourians and towering Kentuckians among the throngs on the decks.

By and by—two or three random stoppages having been made, and the last transient memory of the slumberer vanished, and he himself, not unlikely, waked up and landed ere now—the crowd, as is usual, began in all parts to break up from a concourse into various clusters or squads, which in some cases disintegrated again into quartettes, trios, and couples, or even solitaires; involuntarily submitting to that natural law which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member.

As among Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, or those oriental ones crossing the Red Sea towards Mecca in the festival month, there was no lack of variety. Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlor men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, gold-hunters, buffalo-hunters, bee-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth-hunters, and still keener hunters after all these hunters. Fine ladies in slippers, and moccasined squaws; Northern speculators and Eastern philosophers; English, Irish, German, Scotch, Danes; Santa Fé traders in striped blankets, and Broadway bucks in cravats of cloth of gold; fine-looking Kentucky boatmen, and Japanese looking Mississippi cotton-planters; Quakers in full drab, and United States soldiers in full regimentals; slaves, black, mulatto, quadroon; modish young Spanish Creoles, and old-fashioned French Jews; Mormons and Papists; Dives and Lazarus; jesters and mourners, teetotallers and convivialists, deacons and blacklegs; hard-shell Baptists and clay-eaters; grinning negroes, and Sioux chiefs solemn as high-priests. In short, a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man.

As pine, beech, birch, ash, hackmatack, hemlock, spruce, basswood, maple, interweave their foliage in the natural wood, so these varieties of mortals blended their varieties of visage and garb. A Tartar-like picturesqueness; a sort of pagan abandonment and assurance. Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide.

Chapter 3 *In Which a Variety of Characters Appear*

In the forward part of the boat, not the least attractive object, for a time, was a grotesque negro cripple, in towcloth attire and an old coal-sifter of a tambourine in his hand, who, owing to something wrong about his legs, was, in effect, cut down to the stature of a Newfoundland dog; his knotted black fleece and good-natured, honest black face rubbing against the upper part of people's thighs as he made shift to shuffle about, making music, such as it was, and raising a smile even from the gravest. It was curious to see him, out of his very deformity, indigence, and houselessness, so cheerily endured, raising mirth in some of