Billy Budd, Foretopman

Herman Melville · 1891

1797, the year of the Great Mutiny. Billy Budd, the Handsome Sailor, is pressed off the merchantman Rights-of-Man into H.M.S. Indomitable, where everyone loves him except John Claggart, the master-at-arms — and Captain Vere must decide what the law requires. Melville's last book, complete: all twenty-six chapters, the preface, and the ballad.

Performed exactly as Weaver printed it in 1924, from Melville's manuscript. The roman chapter numerals appear on screen without being read. The annotated edition adds 226 marginal notes, a cutaway of the ship that lights each place as the story reaches it, and slips from the manuscript: Melville's crossed-out lines, his notes in the margin, and the ship's other name.

LISTEN FOR

— The same event told three times: the blow as it happens in the cabin, as Vere puts it to the drum-head court, and as the naval chronicle prints it some weeks later.

— Who is told what: Billy never reports the fore-chains, Vere never says the word mutiny to the crew, and the surgeon keeps his doubts about the captain to himself.

— Billy's stutter: when it comes, when it does not, and the one speech the text calls 'wholly unobstructed in the utterance'.

— The nicknames: Baby Budd, Beauty, the Handsome Sailor, Jemmy Legs, Board-her-in-the-smoke, Starry Vere — who uses each, and to whom.

THE PEOPLE, AS THE BOOK NAMES THEM

Billy Budd	foretopman · the Handsome Sailor
Captain Graveling	master of the merchantman Rights-of-Man
Lieutenant Ratcliffe	boarding officer, H.M.S. Indomitable
Captain The Hon. E. F. Vere	'Starry Vere' · H.M.S. Indomitable
John Claggart	master-at-arms · 'Jemmy Legs'
The Dansker	an old Agamemnon man
The Afterguardsman	
Albert	the captain's hammock-boy
The Surgeon	
The First Lieutenant	presiding at the drum-head court
The Captain Of Marines	Mr. Morton
The Junior Lieutenant	
The Purser	a rotund, ruddy person

THE PLACES

Liverpool · Bristol · Portsmouth · Gibraltar · Spithead · The Nore · The Nile · Trafalgar · The Saintes

CHAPTERS, WITH THEIR TIMES IN THE VIDEO

0:00	Billy Budd, Foretopman
0:42	Preface
2:26	I · The Handsome Sailor

18:38	II · A foundling
26:44	III · The Great Mutiny
31:44	IV · Nelson
37:04	V · Captain Vere
43:43	VI · The captain's books
47:38	VII · John Claggart, master-at-arms
56:38	VIII · The Dansker
1:04:51	IX · The spilled soup
1:07:42	X · The master-at-arms
1:16:54	XI · Pale ire, envy and despair
1:24:57	XII · The lee fore-chains
1:30:46	XIII · A cat's-paw
1:35:57	XIV · The old Dansker
1:39:11	XV · Claggart's glances
1:44:44	XVI · The accusation
2:00:55	XVII · The captain's cabin
2:11:46	XVIII · The drum-head court
2:38:47	XIX · The sentence
2:46:05	XX · Between the guns
2:52:20	XXI · The chaplain
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3:02:25	XXIII · Pipe down
3:08:31	XXIV · Starry Vere
3:11:24	XXV · News from the Mediterranean
3:13:53	XXVI · Billy in the Darbies

WORDS AND THINGS, FROM THE MARGIN

The Great Mutiny In April 1797 the Channel Fleet at Spithead refused to sail over pay and conditions, and won. In May the ships at the Nore rose too; that mutiny was put down and its leader, Richard Parker, hanged.

Impressment The Navy took seamen by force, from the streets and from merchant ships at sea. Billy is pressed from a homeward-bound merchantman.

Rights-of-Man Named for Thomas Paine's Rights of Man (1791), the radical defence of the French Revolution.

Spithead and the Nore At Spithead the men won their first pay rise in over a century, and a royal pardon. At the Nore they blockaded the Thames, stopping ships bound for London, until the mutiny collapsed.

Jemmy Legs Sailors' slang for the master-at-arms.

Cat's-paw A dupe used by another — and a light puff of wind that ruffles calm water.

A drum-head court A summary court-martial, from courts held in the field round an upturned drum. Under the Articles of War, striking a superior officer could mean death.

Article 22 'If any … person in the fleet shall strike any of his superior officers … every such person … shall suffer death.' Articles of War, 1749.

The Mutiny Act Strictly, the act that governed the army; the navy's code was the Articles of War. Melville uses both names.

The Somers In 1842 Commander Mackenzie hanged three men at sea, one the son of the Secretary of War, for a mutiny never attempted. Melville's cousin Guert Gansevoort was the brig's first lieutenant.

The chronicle's version There was no knife: Billy struck once, with his fist. The 'news' inverts nearly everything.

The darbies Handcuffs, or irons. The ballad is the foretopman's, in Billy's own voice.

PASSAGES TO HEAR AGAIN

"Not that he preached to them or said or did anything in particular; but a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones."
Captain Graveling to the lieutenant, before Billy has spoken a word: what Billy did to the forecastle of the Rights.

"'And that's because he's down upon you, Baby Budd.'"
The Dansker's second answer, right after Billy says the master-at-arms always has a pleasant word for him.

"Now something such was Claggart, in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short, 'a depravity according to nature.'"
The close of the chapter the narrator stops the story to write; listen for what is ruled out as a cause before anything is offered.

"'Struck dead by an angel of God. Yet the angel must hang!'"
Vere to the surgeon, over the body, before any court has been called.

"But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King."
Vere to the three officers of the drum-head court, answering the scruple he has just put into their mouths.

"At the penultimate moment, his words, his only ones, words wholly unobstructed in the utterance, were these—'God bless Captain Vere!'"
At the main-yard at four in the morning; listen for the echo that comes back from the crew, and for what the text says Vere does.

"John Claggart, the ship's master-at-arms, discovering that some sort of plot was incipient among an inferior section of the ship's company, and that the ringleader was one William Budd, he, Claggart, in the act of arraigning the man before the captain was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath-knife of Budd."
The naval chronicle, some weeks after; set each clause against what the book has already told you.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Captain Graveling calls Billy his peacemaker, and in the same speech tells how Billy gave the Red Whiskers 'a terrible drubbing'. What exactly does Graveling say Billy did to bring peace to the Rights, and what does he say the Red Whiskers feels now?
2. The Dansker tells Billy three times that Jemmy Legs is down on him and never says why. What does Billy offer against it each time, and what does the text say Claggart actually does and says when the two of them pass?
3. The chapter on Claggart's nature stops the story. List what the narrator rules out as causes of Claggart's enmity and what he offers instead. Keep to the words on the page.
4. In the fore-chains the afterguardsman holds up two objects and says 'they are yours, Billy, if you'll only——'. What does Billy do, what does he tell the forecastlemen he did, and what does he later tell the Dansker?
5. Compare what Claggart tells Vere on the quarter-deck with what Vere already knows of Billy from Lieutenant Ratcliffe. Which of Claggart's details does Vere seize on, and what test does he decide to make before trying the accusation?
6. Vere says 'Take your time' and Billy strikes. Read the paragraph again. What does the text say the fatherly words did, and what does it say about where the blow landed and why?
7. Before any court sits, Vere says 'Struck dead by an angel of God. Yet the angel must hang!' Who hears this, what does that listener think should be done instead, and what does he do with his doubts?
8. The court asks Billy whether he knows of any trouble brewing in the ship. Why does his answer linger, and what reasons does the text give for the answer he finally gives?

9. Vere tells the court that the heart ‘must here be ruled out’ and that the officers’ allegiance is ‘to the King’. Which of the three officers answers him, what does each say, and what does the text say they do once he leaves them to decide?
10. Between the sentence and the hanging the text gives us the chaplain, the crew’s murmur, and the purser arguing with the surgeon. What does each say or do, and what does the text say it cannot tell us about the closeted interview between Vere and Billy?
11. Set the naval chronicle beside the book: the weapon, the plot, Claggart’s age and character, Billy’s nationality, the date. Which of its statements can you check against the story, and what does each come out as?
12. The ballad ends the book in Billy’s own voice. Who is named in it, and which of those names did you hear earlier in the story?

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