

Herman Melville's Guide to a Free Haircut

Adapted by Keith Eckert
from Herman Melville's The Confidence Man

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Cast

Traveler – a middle-aged man, dandily dressed man
Barber – a middle-aged man

(Scene: Evening in a nineteenth century barber shop. The Barber is sleeping in his chair facing away from the door. Behind the Barber's seat is a large sign reading "NO TRUST." The Traveler enters.)

TRAVELER

Bless you, barber!

(Barber, deep asleep, is startled and reaches up into the air not knowing where the voice is coming from.)

What's this? Are you reaching up to catch the birds?

BARBER

(turning around)

Ah! It is only a man, then.

TRAVELER

Only a man? As if to be a man were nothing.
But don't be too sure what I am. You call me man,
Just as the townsfolk called the angels who,
In man's form, came to Lot's house.
You can conclude but little absolute
From the human form, dear barber.
Whatever else you may conclude, it's my
Desire that you conclude to cut my hair.
Are you competent-to-good?

BARBER

(getting up from the chair)

No broker better, sir,

TRAVELER

Very good then.

BARBER

Take this seat.

TRAVELER

(sitting down)

Thank you. But look, look here – what's this?

(The Traveler rises, and points towards “No Trust” sign.)

No trust, sir, means distrust;
Distrust means there's no confidence. Come, come!
What fell suspicion hereby prompts
This scandalous confession? On my life!
Oh, by my heart! At least you are valiant:
Here doubling the spleen of Thersites
With the pluck of Agamemnon.

BARBER

(confused)

Your sort of talk's not in my line, sir. I don't understand.

TRAVELER

Tell me, sir: though I already see
The import of your notice, I do not,
As yet, perceive the object. What is it?

BARBER

Ah, that notice I find very useful, sparing me
Much work which would not pay. Yes, I had lost
A good deal, off and on, before I put that up.

TRAVELER

But what's the object? Surely, you don't mean
To say, in just so many words, that you've
No faith in man? For instance, suppose I say,
“Barber, unhappily I've no small change
With me tonight, but shave me, and depend
Upon your money on the morrow” –
Suppose I said that, would you put your trust
In me? Have confidence?

BARBER

Why -- yes, yes.

TRAVELER

Then why that sign?

BARBER

All people ain't like you, sir.

TRAVELER

All people ain't like me. Then I must either be
Better or worse than most. Now worse,
You couldn't mean; so it remains, you think
Me better than most people. But I am not
Vain enough to believe that.

BARBER

Upon my honor, sir, you talk very well.
But the haircut, sir?

TRAVELER

Better a cold cut, than a cold heart, barber.
Then why that cold sign?
And yet, now that I look into your eyes –
I dare say, that the spirit of that sign
Is not one with your nature. For look:
Setting business views aside, suppose
An honest man should meet you in the night
In some dark corner of the town, his face
Masked by the darkness, asking you to trust
Him for a shave -- how then?

BARBER

Wouldn't trust him, sir.

TRAVELER

But is an honest man not to be trusted?

BARBER

Why -- why -- yes, sir.

TRAVELER

There! don't you see, now?

BARBER

See what?

TRAVELER

Why, you stand contradicted, barber; don't you?

BARBER

No, sir.

TRAVELER

Barber, the enemies of man say insincerity
 Is the most universal and inveterate vice
 Of man – the lasting bar to real amelioration,
 Whether of individuals or the world.
 Don't you, now, barber, by your stubbornness
 On this, give color to such a calumny?

BARBER

(angrily)

Ah! Stubbornness? Will you be cut or not?

TRAVELER

Barber, I will have a haircut, and with pleasure;
 But, pray, don't growl your voice that way.
 Why, if you go through life with gritted teeth
 What comfortless a time you'll have.

BARBER

All this sort of talk, is, as I told you once before,
 Not in my line. In a few minutes I shall shut this shop.
 Will you be cut?

TRAVELER

Cut away, then, barber.

*(The Traveler sits back down. The haircut proceeds
 in silence for a moment or two.)*

TRAVELER

Barber, have a little patience with me;
 I wish not to offend.
 I've been thinking over that you show
 Yourself much of a piece with many men –
 That is, you'll have some faith, and then again,
 Have none. Now, what I ask is this:
 D'you think it sensible for a sensible man,
 To stand one foot on confidence,
 The other on suspicion? Think you, barber,
 That you ought to choose? The one or other?
 That you should either say, "I've confidence
 In all men," and take down your notification;
 Or else say, "I suspect all men," and keep it up.

BARBER

But that is business, sir.

TRAVELER

And that means what?

BARBER

A business, sir, is not like personal affairs.
To lack in trust is better business, sir,
Just better business.

TRAVELER

“Better than what?” I’m left to ask.
Have businesses no moral compass, sir?
Has it not hands to punish, voice
To make the government hear? It has
Accounting books and scribes, men
Employed and locations it calls home. Does it
Not benefit from the common good – the schools,
Canals, the roads and such? Then why
Should business not have confidence?

BARBER

It does have all of that, sir. But it has no face.

TRAVELER

Ah, yes, I see. And lacking face, it lacks in confidence?

BARBER

I’d say it rather lacks in neither, nor abounds.
But rather, business trusts indifferently.

TRAVELER

And so your lack of trust in all of man
Is just good business sense.

BARBER

Strangers, I do say, cannot be trusted, and so (*pointing up to the sign*) no
trust.

TRAVELER

But look, now, barber, look: to say
That strangers can’t be trusted, doesn’t that
Imply that mankind can’t be trusted; for the mass
Of humankind are strangers to each other. Not?
Come, come, my friend, take down that sign;
It’s misanthropical, it is.
I’m a philanthropist, and I’ll insure
You ‘gainst the loss of any cent.

BARBER

So you are a philanthropist?
 Well, that accounts for all, then doesn't it.
 A very odd sort of a man, today's philanthropists.
 I sadly fear, though, you philanthropists
 Know more of good than know of men.
 You say you trust all men. Well, I suppose
 I'd share your trust, yes, were it not
 As barber I have seen too much behind the scenes.

TRAVELER

I think I understand, and much the same
 I've heard from persons in pursuits
 Quite different from your own –
 The lawyer, congressman, the editor,
 And others, each, with melancholy vanity,
 Proclaiming for his art the surest inlets to the truth
 That man's no better than he should be.
 Of which, if all are true, would justify
 Some doubts within a good man's mind. But no,
 It's all mistaken – yes, a grave mistake.

BARBER

That's true, sir, very true.

TRAVELER

I'm glad to hear that!

BARBER

Not so fast, sir. I agree with you
 In thinking that the lawyer, and the congressman,
 Are both in error, yes; but only in so far
 As each claims a peculiar access to the sort
 Of knowledge here in question;
 Because, you see, that every trade which brings
 One into contact with the facts, sir, such a trade
 Is equally an avenue into those facts.

TRAVELER

How's that? What mysteries may be gained within your trade?
 How does mere handling of the outside of men's heads
 Lead you to distrust the inside of their hearts?

BARBER

Can one forever deal in oils, dyes,
 Cosmetics, false moustaches and toupees,
 And still believe that men are what they seem?
 What think you, sir, the barber thinks
 When from behind a careful curtain carefully drawn,
 He shaves the thin, dead stubble off a head,
 And then dismisses it to all the world,
 A radiant in curling auburn? To contrast
 The shamefaced air behind the curtain –
 The fear of naked discovery –
 With the cheerful self-assurance and bold pride
 With which the self-same man steps in the street:
 Ah, sir, they talk the courage of truth, but my own trade
 Teaches me that the truth sometimes is sheepish.
 Lies, sir, lies – brave lies are the lions!

TRAVELER

You twist the moral, barber; Look, now:
 A modest man thrust naked to the street,
 Would he not be abashed? Ashamed?
 Now take him in and clothe the man; would not
 His confidence then be restored?
 Now, what is true of the whole, will hold
 Proportionately true of the part.
 The bald head is a nakedness to which
 The wig's a coat. To feel uneasy at one's nakedness at top,
 And feel some comfort by it being clothed –
 These feelings do attest a proper self respect.
 So I've confuted you, dear barber.

BARBER

Pardon, but I do not see you have. His coat
 No man pretends to palm off as his flesh,
 And yet the bald man palms off hair, not his, for his.

TRAVELER

Not his own, my friend? If he has fairly purchased it,
 The law protects him in its ownership,
 Even against the claims of the head on which it grew.
 But you cannot believe what you are saying, barber;
 You talk to merely humor me. I couldn't think
 That you would deal contentedly
 In the impostures you condemn.

BARBER

Ah, sir, a man must live.

TRAVELER

And that cannot be done without committing sin
Against your conscience? Take some other calling!

BARBER

It wouldn't mend the matter much, sir. Would it?

TRAVELER

D'you think, then, barber, that, at certain points,
All the trades and callings are on a par?
Fatal, indeed, yes, inexpressibly dreadful,
To be a barber, if to such conclusions
It necessarily leads. But, barber, you appear
Not so much a misbeliever, as a man misled.
Now, let me set you on the proper track;
Let me restore your trust in human nature,
And by no other means than that same trade
That's brought you to suspect it.

*(The barber finishes up the haircut and removes the
robe, etc.)*

BARBER

You mean, sir, you'd have me taking down that sign.

TRAVELER

I do. To try, for the remainder of the present week,
An experiment in trusting men.

BARBER

Ah, I will try it. For the novelty –
But only for this week, and only if you,
As you volunteered, secure me 'gainst a loss.

TRAVELER

(getting up from the chair)

Agreed. But still the fact remains, that you
Engage to trust in men, a thing you said
You would not do, at least not unreservedly.

BARBER

Still the more to save my credit, I insist
That the agreement should be put in black
And white, especially the security.

TRAVELER

Fine. Bring us paper, pen and ink. Then grave
 As any notary I'll write it up.
 But while I do, take down that sign –
 That Timon's sign, there; down with it.

*(The Traveler writes while the Barber takes down
 the sign.)*

Ah, barber! How ingenious human beings are;
 And how kindly we reciprocate
 Each other's little delicacies, don't we?
 What better proof that we are kind,
 Considerate fellows, with responsive fellow-feelings –
 Eh, barber? But back to business. Let me see.
 Ah, what's your name?

BARBER

William Cream, sir.

*(The Barber reads over his shoulder and nods in
 agreement.)*

TRAVELER

There, barber; will that do?

BARBER

That will, that will. And now put down your name.

(Both sign the document.)

Very good, and nothing now remains but your security.

TRAVELER

What do you mean?

BARBER

(pointing to the paper)

Why, here, you are engaged, sir, to insure me
 Against a certain loss, and --

TRAVELER

Certain? Is it so certain that you're going to lose?

BARBER

What use is your mere writing and your saying you'll
 Insure me, lest beforehand you will place
 Into my hands a money-pledge, sufficient to that end?

TRAVELER

I see; a pledge.

BARBER

That's right. I'll put it low; say fifty dollars.

TRAVELER

Fifty dollars! What sort of a start is this?
You are engaged a given time to trust in man,
And, for your first step make a steep demand
Implying you've no confidence at all.
Barber, you must be consistent.
No, I will not let you have the money now;
I will not let you violate the inmost spirit
Of our contract in that way.
And so goodnight, and I will see you soon.

(The Traveler starts to exit.)

BARBER

Stay, sir, you've forgotten something.

TRAVELER

My handkerchief? My gloves? No, I've forgotten nothing. Goodnight.

BARBER

Stay, sir -- the -- the cut.

TRAVELER

Ah yes, I did forget to pay you for my haircut, yes.
But as I think on it, I shan't pay you now.
Look to your own agreement; You must trust!
'Gainst any loss you hold the guarantee.
Goodnight, good barber!

(The Traveler exits.)

BARBER

The man is quite an original. Quite an original.

(The lights go down.)

FINIS