

## **Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street**

Herman Melville

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*Our story this week is called "Bartleby." It was written by Herman Melville, one of America's best-known writers. Here is Shep O'Neal to tell you the story in Special English.*

I am an old lawyer, and I have three men working for me. My business continued to grow and so I decided to get one more man to help write legal papers.

I have met a great many people in my days, but the man who answered my advertisement was the strangest person I have ever heard of or met.

He stood outside my office and waited for me to speak. He was a small man, quiet and dressed in a clean but old suit of clothes. I asked him his name. It was Bartleby.

At first Bartleby almost worked himself too hard writing the legal papers I gave him. He worked through the day by sunlight, and into the night by candlelight. I was happy with his work, but not happy with the way he worked. He was too quiet. But, he worked well...like a machine, never looking or speaking.

One day, I asked Bartleby to come to my office to study a legal paper with me. Without moving from his chair, Bartleby said: "I do not want to."

I sat for a short time, too surprised to move. Then I became excited.

"You do not want to. What do you mean, are you sick? I want you to help me with this paper."

"I do not want to."

His face was calm. His eyes showed no emotion. He was not angry. This is strange, I thought. What should I do? But, the telephone rang, and I forgot the problem for the time being.

A few days later, four long documents came into the office. They needed careful study, and I decided to give one document to each of my men. I called and all came to my office. But not Bartleby.

"Bartleby, quick, I am waiting."

He came, and stood in front of me for a moment. "I don't want to," he said then turned and went back to his desk.

I was so surprised, I could not move. There was something about Bartleby that froze me, yet, at the same time, made me feel sorry for him.

As time passed, I saw that Bartleby never went out to eat dinner. Indeed, he never went anywhere. At eleven o'clock each morning, one of the men would bring Bartleby some ginger cakes.

"Umm. He lives on them," I thought. "Poor fellow!" He is a little foolish at times, but he is useful to me.

"Bartleby," I said one afternoon. "Please go to the post office and bring my mail."

"I do not want to."

I walked back to my office too shocked to think. Let's see, the problem here is...one of my workers named Bartleby will not do some of the things I ask him to do. One important thing about him though, he is always in his office.

One Sunday I walked to my office to do some work. When I placed the key in the door, I couldn't open it. I stood a little surprised, then called, thinking someone might be inside. There was. Bartleby. He came from his office and told me he did not want to let me in.

The idea of Bartleby living in my law office had a strange effect on me. I slunk away much like a dog does when it has been shouted at...with its tail between its legs.

Was anything wrong? I did not for a moment believe Bartleby would keep a woman in my office. But for some time he must have eaten, dressed and slept there. How lonely and friendless Bartleby must be.

I decided to help him. The next morning I called him to my office.

"Bartleby, will you tell me anything about yourself?"

"I do not want to."

I sat down with him and said, "You do not have to tell me about your personal history, but when you finish writing that document..."

"I have decided not to write anymore," he said. And left my office.

What was I to do? Bartleby would not work at all. Then why should he stay on his job? I decided to tell him to go. I gave him six days to leave the office and told him I would give him some extra money. If he would not work, he must leave.

On the sixth day, somewhat hopefully, I looked into the office Bartleby used. He was still there.

The next morning, I went to the office early. All was still. I tried to open the door, but it was locked. Bartleby's voice came from inside. I stood as if hit by lightning. I walked the streets thinking. "Well, Bartleby, if you will not leave me, I shall leave you."

I paid some men to move all the office furniture to another place. Bartleby just stood there as the men took his chair away.

"Goodbye Bartleby, I am going. Goodbye and God be with you. Here take this money." I placed it in his hands. It dropped to the floor; and then, strange to say, I had difficulty leaving the person I wanted to leave me.

A few days later, a stranger visited me in my new office. "You are responsible for the man you left in your last office," he said. The owner of the building has given me a court order which says you must take him away. We tried to make him leave, but he returned and troubles the others there.

I went back to my old office and found Bartleby sitting on the empty floor.

"Bartleby, one of two things must happen. I will get you a different job, or you can go to work for some other lawyer."

He said he did not like either choice.

"Bartleby, will you come home with me and stay there until we decide what you will do?"

He answered softly, "No, I do not want to make any changes."

I answered nothing more. I fled. I rode around the city and visited places of historic interest, anything to get Bartleby off my mind.

When I entered my office later, I found a message for me. Bartleby had been taken to prison.

I found him there, and when he saw me he said: "I know you, and I have nothing to say to you."

"But I didn't put you here, Bartleby." I was deeply hurt. I told him I gave the prison guard money to buy him a good dinner.

"I do not want to eat today, he said. I never eat dinner."

Days passed, and I went to see Bartleby again. I was told he was sleeping in the prison yard outside.

Sleeping? The thin Bartleby was lying on the cold stones. I stooped to look at the small man lying on his side with his knees against his chest. I walked closer and looked down at him. His eyes were open. He seemed to be in a deep sleep.

"Won't he eat today, either, or does he live without eating?" the guard asked.

"Lives without eating," I answered...and closed his eyes.

"Uh...he is asleep isn't he?" the guard said.

"With kings and lawyers," I answered.

One little story came to me some days after Bartleby died. I learned he had worked for many years in the post office. He was in a special office that opened all the nation's letters that never reach the person they were written to. It is called the dead letter office. The letters are not written clearly, so the mailmen cannot read the addresses.

Well, poor Bartleby had to read the letters, to see if anyone's name was written clearly so they could be sent. Think of it. From one letter a wedding ring fell, the finger it was bought for perhaps lies rotting in the grave. Another letter has money to help someone long since dead. Letters filled with hope for those who died without hope.

Poor Bartleby! He himself had lost all hope. His job had killed something inside him.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!