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*Young Goodman Brown
and Other Stories*

The Gentle Boy

IN THE COURSE OF THE YEAR 1656, several of the people called Quakers, led, as they professed, by the inward movement of the spirit, made their appearance in New England. Their reputation, as holders of mystic and pernicious principles, having spread before them, the Puritans early endeavoured to banish, and to prevent the further intrusion of the rising sect. But the measures by which it was intended to purge the land of heresy, though more than sufficiently vigorous, were entirely unsuccessful. The Quakers, esteeming persecution as a divine call to the post of danger, laid claim to a holy courage, unknown to the Puritans themselves, who had shunned the cross, by providing for the peaceable exercise of their religion in a distant wilderness. Though it was the singular fact that every nation of the earth rejected the wandering enthusiasts who practised peace towards all men, the place of greatest uneasiness and peril, and therefore in their eyes the most eligible, was the province of Massachusetts Bay. The fines, imprisonments and stripes, liberally distributed by our pious forefathers, the popular antipathy, so strong that it endured nearly a hundred years after actual persecution had ceased, were attractions as powerful for the Quakers, as peace, honour and reward would have been for the worldly-minded. Every European vessel brought new cargoes of the sect, eager to testify against the oppression which they hoped to share; and, when shipmasters were restrained by heavy fines from affording them passage, they made long and circuitous journeys through

the Indian country and appeared in the province as if conveyed by a supernatural power. Their enthusiasm, heightened almost to madness by the treatment which they received, produced actions contrary to the rules of decency, as well as of rational religion, and presented a singular contrast to the calm and staid deportment of their sectual successors of the present day. The command of the spirit, inaudible except to the soul, and not to be controverted on grounds of human wisdom, was made a plea for most indecorous exhibitions, which, abstractly considered, well deserved the moderate chastisement of the rod. These extravagances, and the persecution which was at once their cause and consequence, continued to increase, till, in the year 1659, the government of Massachusetts Bay indulged two members of the Quaker sect with the crown of martyrdom.*

That those who were active in or consenting to this measure made themselves responsible for innocent blood is not to be denied: yet the extenuating circumstances of their conduct are more numerous than can generally be pleaded by persecutors. The inhabitants of New England were a people whose original bond of union was their peculiar religious principles. For the peaceful exercise of their own mode of worship, an object, the very reverse of universal liberty of conscience, they had hewn themselves a home in the wilderness; they had made vast sacrifices of whatever is dear to man; they had exposed themselves to the peril of death, and to a life which rendered the accomplishment of that peril almost a blessing. They had found no city of refuge prepared for them, but, with Heaven's assistance, they had created one; and it would be hard to say whether justice did not authorize their determination to guard its gate against all who were destitute of the prescribed title to admittance. The principle of their foundation was such, that to destroy the unity of religion might have been to subvert the government and break up the colony, especially

at a period when the state of affairs in England had stopped the tide of emigration and drawn back many of the pilgrims to their native homes. The magistrates of Massachusetts Bay were, moreover, most imperfectly informed respecting the real tenets and character of the Quaker sect. They had heard of them, from various parts of the earth, as opposers of every known opinion, and enemies of all established governments; they had beheld extravagances which seemed to justify these accusations; and the idea suggested by their own wisdom may be gathered from the fact that the persons of many individuals were searched, in the expectation of discovering witch marks. But after all allowances, it is to be feared that the death of the Quakers was principally owing to the polemic fierceness, that distinct passion of human nature, which has so often produced frightful guilt in the most sincere and zealous advocates of virtue and religion. An indelible stain of blood is upon the hands of all who consented to this act, but a large share of the awful responsibility must rest upon the person then at the head of the government.* He was a man of narrow mind and imperfect education, and his uncompromising bigotry was made hot and mischievous by violent and hasty passions; he exerted his influence indecorously and unjustifiably to compass the death of the enthusiasts; and his whole conduct, in respect to them, was marked by brutal cruelty. The Quakers, whose revengeful feelings were not less deep because they were inactive, remembered this man and his associates, in aftertimes. The historian of the sect* affirms that, by the wrath of Heaven, a blight fell upon the land in the vicinity of the "bloody town" of Boston, so that no wheat would grow there, and he takes his stand, as it were, among the graves of the ancient persecutors, and triumphantly recounts the judgements that overtook them, in old age or at the parting hour. He tells us that they died suddenly, and violently, and in madness; but nothing can exceed the bitter

mockery with which he records the loathsome disease, and “death by rottenness”, of the fierce and cruel governor.

* * *

On the evening of the autumn day that had witnessed the martyrdom of two men of the Quaker persuasion, a Puritan settler was returning from the metropolis to the neighbouring country town in which he resided. The air was cool, the sky clear and the lingering twilight was made brighter by the rays of a young moon, which had now nearly reached the verge of the horizon. The traveller, a man of middle age, wrapped in a grey frieze cloak, quickened his pace when he had reached the outskirts of the town, for a gloomy extent of nearly four miles lay between him and his house. The low, straw-thatched houses were scattered at considerable intervals along the road and, the country having been settled but about thirty years, the tracts of original forest still bore no small proportion to the cultivated ground. The autumn wind wandered among the branches, whirling away the leaves from all except the pine trees, and moaning as if it lamented the desolation of which it was the instrument. The road had penetrated the mass of woods that lay nearest to the town, and was just emerging into an open space, when the traveller's ears were saluted by a sound more mournful than even that of the wind. It was like the wailing of someone in distress, and it seemed to proceed from beneath a tall and lonely fir tree, in the centre of a cleared but unenclosed and uncultivated field. The Puritan could not but remember that this was the very spot which had been made accursed a few hours before by the execution of the Quakers, whose bodies had been thrown together into one hasty grave, beneath the tree on which they suffered. He struggled, however, against the superstitious fears which belonged to the age, and compelled himself to pause and listen.

“The voice is most likely mortal, nor have I cause to tremble if it be otherwise,” thought he, straining his eyes through the dim moonlight. “Methinks it is like the wailing of a child; some infant, it may be, which has strayed from its mother and chanced upon this place of death. For the ease of mine own conscience, I must search this matter out.”

He therefore left the path, and continued somewhat fearfully across the field. Though now so desolate, its soil was pressed down and trampled by the thousand footsteps of those who had witnessed the spectacle of that day, all of whom had now retired, leaving the dead to their loneliness. The traveller at length reached the fir tree, which from the middle upward was covered with living branches, although a scaffold had been erected beneath, and other preparations made for the work of death. Under this unhappy tree, which in aftertimes was believed to drop poison with its dew, sat the one solitary mourner for innocent blood. It was a slender and light-clad little boy, who leant his face upon a hillock of fresh-turned and half-frozen earth, and wailed bitterly, yet in a suppressed tone, as if his grief might receive the punishment of crime. The Puritan, whose approach had been unperceived, laid his hand upon the child’s shoulder and addressed him compassionately.

“You have chosen a dreary lodging, my poor boy, and no wonder that you weep,” said he. “But dry your eyes, and tell me where your mother dwells. I promise you, if the journey be not too far, I will leave you in her arms tonight.”

The boy had hushed his wailing at once, and turned his face upward to the stranger. It was a pale, bright-eyed countenance, certainly not more than six years old, but sorrow, fear and want had destroyed much of its infantile expression. The Puritan, seeing the boy’s frightened gaze, and feeling that he trembled under his hand, endeavoured to reassure him.

“Nay, if I intended to do you harm, little lad, the readiest way were to leave you here. What! You do not fear to sit beneath the gallows on a new-made grave, and yet you tremble at a friend’s touch. Take heart, child, and tell me what is your name, and where is your home?”

“Friend,” replied the little boy, in a sweet, though faltering voice, “they call me Ilbrahim, and my home is here.”

The pale, spirited face, the eyes that seemed to mingle with the moonlight, the sweet, airy voice and the outlandish name almost made the Puritan believe that the boy was in truth a being which had sprung up out of the grave on which he sat. But perceiving that the apparition stood the test of a short mental prayer, and remembering that the arm which he had touched was lifelike, he adopted a more rational supposition.

“The poor child is stricken in his intellect,” thought he, “but verily his words are fearful, in a place like this.” He then spoke soothingly, intending to humour the boy’s fantasy.

“Your home will scarce be comfortable, Ilbrahim, this cold autumn night, and I fear you are ill provided with food. I am hastening to a warm supper and bed, and if you will go with me, you shall share them!”

“I thank thee, friend, but though I be hungry and shivering with cold, thou wilt not give me food nor lodging,” replied the boy, in the quiet tone which despair had taught him, even so young. “My father was of the people whom all men hate. They have laid him under this heap of earth, and here is my home.”

The Puritan, who had laid hold of little Ilbrahim’s hand, relinquished it as if he were touching a loathsome reptile. But he possessed a compassionate heart, which not even religious prejudice could harden into stone.

“God forbid that I should leave this child to perish, though he comes of the accursed sect,” said he to himself. “Do we not all

spring from an evil root? Are we not all in darkness till the light doth shine upon us? He shall not perish, neither in body nor, if prayer and instruction may avail for him, in soul." He then spoke aloud and kindly to Ilbrahim, who had again hid his face in the cold earth of the grave. "Was every door in the land shut against you, my child, that you have wandered to this unhallowed spot?"

"They drove me forth from the prison when they took my father thence," said the boy, "and I stood afar off, watching the crowd of people, and when they were gone, I came hither, and found only this grave. I knew that my father was sleeping here, and I said, 'This shall be my home.'"

"No, child, no – not while I have a roof over my head, or a morsel to share with you!" exclaimed the Puritan, whose sympathies were now fully excited. "Rise up and come with me, and fear not any harm."

The boy wept afresh, and clung to the heap of earth, as if the cold heart beneath it were warmer to him than any in a living breast. The traveller, however, continued to entreat him tenderly and, seeming to acquire some degree of confidence, he at length arose. But his slender limbs tottered with weakness, his little head grew dizzy and he leant against the tree of death for support.

"My poor boy, are you so feeble?" said the Puritan. "When did you taste food last?"

"I ate of bread and water with my father in the prison," replied Ilbrahim, "but they brought him none neither yesterday nor today, saying that he had eaten enough to bear him to his journey's end. Trouble not thyself for my hunger, kind friend, for I have lacked food many times ere now."

The traveller took the child in his arms and wrapped his cloak about him, while his heart stirred with shame and anger against the gratuitous cruelty of the instruments in this persecution. In the awakened warmth of his feelings, he resolved that, at whatever

risk, he would not forsake the poor little defenceless being whom Heaven had confided to his care. With this determination, he left the accursed field, and resumed the homeward path from which the wailing of the boy had called him. The light and motionless burthen scarcely impeded his progress, and he soon beheld the fire rays from the windows of the cottage which he, a native of a distant clime, had built in the western wilderness. It was surrounded by a considerable extent of cultivated ground, and the dwelling was situated in the nook of a wood-covered hill, whither it seemed to have crept for protection.

“Look up, child,” said the Puritan to Ilbrahim, whose faint head had sunk upon his shoulder, “there is our home.”

At the word “home”, a thrill passed through the child’s frame, but he continued silent. A few moments brought them to the cottage door, at which the owner knocked; for at that early period, when savages were wandering everywhere among the settlers, bolt and bar were indispensable to the security of a dwelling. The summons was answered by a bondservant, a coarse-clad and dull-featured piece of humanity, who, after ascertaining that his master was the applicant, undid the door, and held a flaring pine-knot torch to light him in. Farther back in the passageway, the red blaze discovered a matronly woman, but no little crowd of children came bounding forth to greet their father’s return. As the Puritan entered, he thrust aside his cloak and displayed Ilbrahim’s face to the female.

“Dorothy, here is a little outcast whom Providence hath put into our hands,” observed he. “Be kind to him, even as if he were of those dear ones who have departed from us.”

The wife’s eyes filled with tears; she enquired neither who little Ilbrahim was, nor whence he came, but kissed his cheek and led the way into the dwelling. The sitting room, which was also the kitchen, was lighted by a cheerful fire upon the large stone-laid

hearth, and a confused variety of objects shone out and disappeared in the unsteady blaze. There were the household articles, the many wooden trenchers, the one large pewter dish and the copper kettle whose inner surface was glittering like gold. There were the lighter implements of husbandry, the spade, the sickle and the scythe, all hanging by the door, and the axe before which a thousand trees had bowed themselves. On another part of the wall were the steel cap and iron breastplate, the sword and the matchlock gun. There, in a corner, was a little chair, the memorial of a brood of children whose place by the fireside was vacant for ever. And there, on a table near the window, among all those tokens of labour, war and mourning, was the Holy Bible, the book of life, an emblem of the blessed comforts which it offers, to those who can receive them, amidst the toil, the strife and sorrow of this world. Dorothy hastened to bring the little chair from its corner; she placed it on the hearth and, seating the poor orphan there, addressed him in words of tenderness, such as only a mother's experience could have taught her. At length, when he had timidly begun to taste his warm bread and milk, she drew her husband apart.

“What pale and bright-eyed little boy is this, Tobias?” she enquired. “Is he one whom the wilderness folk have ravished from some Christian mother?”

“No, Dorothy, this poor child is no captive from the wilderness,” he replied. “The heathen savage would have given him to eat of his scanty morsel, and to drink of his birchen cup; but Christian men – alas! – had cast him out to die.”

Then he told her how he had found him beneath the gallows, upon his father's grave; and how his heart had prompted him, like the speaking of an inward voice, to take the little outcast home and be kind unto him. He acknowledged his resolution to feed and clothe him, as if he were his own child, and to afford him

the instruction which should counteract the pernicious errors hitherto instilled into his infant mind. Dorothy was gifted with even a quicker tenderness than her husband, and she approved of all his doings and intentions. She drew near to Ilbrahim, who, having finished his repast, sat with the tears hanging upon his long eyelashes, but with a singular and unchildlike composure on his little face.

“Have you a mother, dear child?” she enquired.

The tears burst forth from his full heart, as he attempted to reply, but Dorothy at length understood that he had a mother, who, like the rest of her sect, was a persecuted wanderer. She had been taken from the prison a short time before, carried into the uninhabited wilderness, and left to perish there by hunger or wild beasts. This was no uncommon method of disposing of the Quakers, and they were accustomed to boast that the inhabitants of the desert were more hospitable to them than civilized man.

“Fear not, little boy, you shall not need a mother, and a kind one,” said Dorothy, when she had gathered this information. “Dry your tears, Ilbrahim, and be my child, as I will be your mother.”

The good woman prepared the little bed, from which her own children had successively been borne to another resting place. Before Ilbrahim would consent to occupy it, he knelt down, and as Dorothy listened to his simple and affecting prayer she marvelled how the parents that had taught it to him could have been judged worthy of death. When the boy had fallen asleep, she bent over his pale and spiritual countenance, pressed a kiss upon his white brow, drew the bedclothes up about his neck and went away with a pensive gladness in her heart.

Tobias Pearson was not among the earliest emigrants from the old country. He had remained in England during the first years of the Civil War, in which he had borne some share as a coronet of dragoons, under Cromwell. But when the ambitious designs

of his leader began to develop themselves, he quitted the army of the parliament and sought a refuge from the strife, which was no longer holy among the people of his persuasion, in the colony of Massachusetts. A more worldly consideration had perhaps an influence in drawing him thither, for New England offered advantages to men of unprosperous fortunes as well as to dissatisfied religionists, and Pearson had hitherto found it difficult to provide for a wife and increasing family. To this supposed impurity of motive, the more bigoted Puritans were inclined to impute the removal by death of all the children, for whose earthly good the father had been over-thoughtful. They had left their native country blooming like roses, and like roses they had perished in a foreign soil. Those expounders of the ways of Providence, who had thus judged their brother, and attributed his domestic sorrows to his sin, were not more charitable when they saw him and Dorothy endeavouring to fill up the void in their hearts by the adoption of an infant of the accursed sect. Nor did they fail to communicate their disapprobation to Tobias; but the latter, in reply, merely pointed at the little quiet, lovely boy, whose appearance and deportment were indeed as powerful arguments as could possibly have been adduced in his own favour. Even his beauty, however, and his winning manners, sometimes produced an effect ultimately unfavourable; for the bigots, when the outer surfaces of their iron hearts had been softened and again grew hard, affirmed that no merely natural cause could have so worked upon them. Their antipathy to the poor infant was also increased by the ill success of divers theological discussions, in which it was attempted to convince him of the errors of his sect. Ilbrahim, it is true, was not a skilful controversialist, but the feeling of his religion was strong as instinct in him, and he could neither be enticed nor driven from the faith which his father had died for. The odium of this stubbornness was shared in a great measure

by the child's protectors, insomuch that Tobias and Dorothy very shortly began to experience a most bitter species of persecution, in the cold regards of many a friend whom they had valued. The common people manifested their opinions more openly. Pearson was a man of some consideration, being a Representative to the General Court, and an approved lieutenant in the trainbands, yet, within a week after his adoption of Ilbrahim, he had been both hissed and hooted. Once, also, when walking through a solitary piece of woods, he heard a loud voice from some invisible speaker, and it cried, "What shall be done to the backslider? Lo! The scourge is knotted for him, even the whip of nine cords, and every cord three knots!" These insults irritated Pearson's temper for the moment; they entered also into his heart, and became imperceptible but powerful workers towards an end which his most secret thought had not yet whispered.

* * *

On the second Sabbath after Ilbrahim became a member of their family, Pearson and his wife deemed it proper that he should appear with them at public worship. They had anticipated some opposition to this measure from the boy, but he prepared himself in silence, and at the appointed hour was clad in the new mourning suit which Dorothy had wrought for him. As the parish was then, and during many subsequent years, unprovided with a bell, the signal for the commencement of religious exercises was the beat of a drum; in connection with which peculiarity it may be mentioned that an apartment of the meeting house served the purposes of a powder magazine and armoury. At the first sound of that martial call to the place of holy and quiet thoughts, Tobias and Dorothy set forth, each holding a hand of little Ilbrahim, like two parents linked together by the infant of their love. On their path through the leafless woods, they were overtaken by many persons