

The Boy from the Inn

George made his way along the market street through the crowds, horse drawn carts and impatient horsemen filling the cobblestone road. Smells of fish, leather and spices from the stalls mixed with the familiar foul smell of the ditch that ran along the street. Below on the Severn River he spotted a fishing vessel pulling into the dock. He liked to watch the boats at the wharf unload their wares for the City of Gloucester's markets, and there were always boats coming and going on the river.

The tobacco shop George was heading for stood close to the end of the market. There were no shortcuts to the small shop that stood wedged between other buildings behind the open market stalls. He had spotted the iron sign above the tobacco shop just as two boys who looked to be near his age, twelve or thirteen, came running from the entrance.

George flattened himself against the stone wall as the boys raced past and disappeared into the crowds of the noisy market. The stout, red-faced shopkeeper came running from the doorway shouting, "If I catch you in here again, I'll skin you alive." As the boys melted into the crowds he stopped and wiped his face

on the corner of his apron. “Thieves,” he muttered, turning back to the shop. George followed him inside.

The owner straightened a toppled box before he looked up. “Ah, it’s you, young master Whitefield. You saw those two thieves? They’ll be hanging from the gallows one of these days.” He wiped his face once more. “Thanks be for them as brings their children up to be decent citizens like yourself. What can I do for you today, young sir?”

George smiled as he fingered the two coins he had stolen only that very morning from his mother’s apron while she slept. She would never send him, the last born of her six sons to the gallows even though now in 1727, England’s harsh code of law hanged thieves his age and younger. “Just a bit of tobacco for one of the guests,” he said and smiled again, knowing that the guest did not exist.

He was nearly back to the inn when he passed a narrow alley and saw the same boys who had run from the tobacco shop. They were examining what looked like a shiny new smoking pipe. The taller boy saw George looking their way, and quickly stuck the pipe in the pocket of his oversized coat. “What ya’ lookin’ at, Squint Eyes? Go on. Get home to your mam and your fancy tavern.”

“Yeah, Squint Eyes, fancy boy Squint Eyes,” the younger boy chanted.

George looked away as if he hadn’t heard them. He walked on until he had turned a corner out of

their sight, and ran to the side street that would lead him to the inn and safety. ‘Squint Eyes’ the hated nickname burned in his heart. He wasn’t cross-eyed. Only one eye squinted a bit from measles he’d had as a baby. “May God blast them!” The words of the Psalms calling down judgment on the wicked came to him quickly, and he would have thought of more if his sister Elizabeth had not called his name.

She was just coming from the entrance to the stables behind the great inn. “George Whitefield, where have you been?” Her blue eyes snapped, and her wheat colored hair that was so like his, stuck out from under her cap. The broom in her hand told George she had been at work. “You’d better not let old toad Longden catch you.” It was the name she always called their stepfather. “Everyone is hurrying around trying to stay out of his way. Have you forgotten that tonight the players are coming and the whole inn is full?”

George glanced up at the Bell Inn. It was three stories high and the finest in Gloucester; at least it had been when his father was still alive. “I haven’t forgotten,” George said. “The play is well enough and the players, but with our stepfather running things, you know there won’t be any profit this night. He’s ruining the inn and everyone knows it,” George said.

Elizabeth was one year older than George and already like their mother. Her eyes filled with tears now as she stood searching her brother’s face. Their

older brothers were always kept busy under the heavy hand of their stepfather, but she and George still managed to share most things together. “George, you were only two years old when our father died and you don’t remember him. He was a good father and a good husband. I’m worried about our mother more than the Inn.” She lowered her voice, “I do not think she will be married much longer to Longden.”

George nodded his head. “It’s worse than I thought then. But the sooner that man is gone the better. I will leave school and see what I can do to help our mother with the work. It may be we can yet keep the Bell Inn.” With a pat on Elizabeth’s shoulder, George went quickly through the back entrance. Though he would miss the wildness and mischief with his friends he wouldn’t mind leaving school. At least tonight he would get to see one of the plays he so loved, even though he must watch it from his special hiding place.

That night as George watched the actors in their splendid costumes perform on stage he quietly mouthed his favorite lines. He was good at imitating the actor’s voices. Each year at St. Mary’s de Crypt school he was the one chosen to perform before important visitors. He loved acting and one of his favorite roles was to be a minister. He especially liked pretending to be the local clergyman, an older gentleman giving a sermon or reading prayers. He might even like to be a real clergyman some day. He would be good at it, and ministers of the Church of England enjoyed

respect and honor, and could make a good living. They were also free to enjoy whatever pleasures of English society they liked, including plays. Freedom was not something George enjoyed these days. The heavy hand of his stepfather made everyone fearful and angry. As George thought of his stepfather, he missed the words on stage that made the audience suddenly burst into laughter.

True to his word, George begged his mother to let him leave school and help at the inn. Tearfully, she agreed. "You'll need this," she said handing him a large blue apron. At once George put it on and from then on wore it as he served customers at the tap.

As the weeks passed George became a well-known face behind the bar. Many of his patrons were already drunk as they called out for refills. George and his friends had once or twice become drunk, and happily they had not been found out. Now he must mop up after drunken guests, clean rooms, and help with whatever customers demanded. At night in his room he studied plays and read books. Now he wished he were back at school learning the classics. He also missed his former friends and the rowdy life they had enjoyed together. He had no time for it now. He was good at what he did in the inn, but things had only gotten worse under his stepfather's greed and mismanagement. And to make things worse his mother and Elizabeth were no longer at home. George's mother had left her husband and the inn to live in a small place much poorer than

what she had once had. She had taken Elizabeth with her.

Tired as he was, George's one joy was to read each night, and when he could he helped himself to books from their unsuspecting owners. Often they were devotional books like the book he was reading this night. The candle on the table in front of him had worn down to a stub when someone knocked on his door. "It's me, Richard," said a low voice.

As his older brother Richard entered the room George noted the tired lines on his face, but there was also a look he hadn't seen lately: a determined one. Their stepfather had not only stolen the inn away from them; he had turned Richard into a servant to whom he showed no mercy. Richard sat on the edge of George's cot. "You need to know that Longden has left in a rage," he said. "The court has ruled in my favor and the Inn is now in my hands."

George stood so quickly he nearly upset his table. "Brother, this is good news! Does our mother know?"

"She knows," Richard replied. "And there's more that will surprise even you, George. I have married a wife and she will now be mistress of this Inn. I have no doubt that you will find the place much changed for the better and soon. We shall one day have the Bell back to her old greatness, eh brother?"

George's head spun with all the news. When his brother had gone and closed the door behind him, George smiled. He wouldn't mind working hard at

the inn now that it was back in the family. He would sleep well tonight. His dreams were untroubled and morning came brightly, but with it trouble quickly returned.

His new sister-in law, a tall, commanding woman, soon let George know that she wanted him gone. Nothing George did seemed to please her. If he started the cleaning at one end, she would say he should have started at the other. They fought continually and by the end of a month they were no longer speaking to each other.

Before the year was out George could stand it no longer, and left to visit a brother living in Bristol. He did not know if he would return to the inn or not. One Sunday with his brother's family at the church of St. John the sermon of the day seemed meant just for him. As he listened he told himself, "I shall never go back to a life of serving in a tavern." He would mend his ways, and stay away from his wild friends.

Back in Gloucester, George stayed with his mother and Elizabeth in their cramped quarters. His mother had once known a comfortable life and came from a good family. Now she wore old gowns, and they lived on very little money. George tried but could not find work he was willing to do. At night his mother would sit sewing by candlelight as George read and wrote. Often she would say, "George, if only you could go to Oxford and study. I always hoped you would be a minister, son." George would nod his head and say,

“I would love to go, Mother, but there is no money for Oxford.”

One day everything changed. He had just entered the house when an excited Elizabeth, her face warm from the cooking fire, blurted out some news, “George, your friend Henry came to visit this very day and he’s left word for you with our mother. Come sit down, you must hear this.”

Puzzled, George sat at the table as his mother laid a paper before him. “Henry has left a note to tell you how you may go free to Oxford to become a minister. Think of the high honor you will bring our family, son as a minister!”

George read Henry’s note. “He says servitors work as servants and are allowed to take courses for free. Students from wealthy families will pay fees to a servitor to shine boots, carry books, clean rooms – whatever the rich students want done. He says I may apply to be a servitor at Pembroke College, one of the colleges at Oxford. Mother, I would like to do this,” George said.

“You must go back to St. Mary’s school with your old Master and finish your studies of the classics,” his mother said. “You’ll need those to enter Oxford.”

George could feel his heart beating loudly as he faced his old Master at St. Mary’s school. “Yes, Sir, I want to enter the church and serve God.” Would the Master believe him? In the past George had often entertained the other students by mocking the clergy? George waited for his answer.

“Perhaps there is more to you, young Whitefield, than ever I thought,” the Master said. “Does that head of yours still recall its Latin?” Opening a book and handing it to George, he ordered him to read. As George began to read the page its Latin words came easily to his tongue. “That will do,” the Master said. “We shall prepare you for Oxford. The rest is up to you and God.”

George smiled. He was certain he could do this. Already he could tell a story as well as the local parish priest! He had even written sermons to amuse his friends.