*BLESSЀD ARE THE MEEK*

*by Brent Shore*

PROLOGUE

James would not have liked it but he would surely have forgiven me. For he was unarguably a forgiving man, a resolute man who could take a blow and then prepare himself, if he must, for another. James would have forgiven me my nature to reference from time to time the scriptures, to find wisdom and succour in those holy pages, and so to begin his story, in some form of epigram, with words from Ecclesiastes chapter nine:

*The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet the bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill. But time and chance happeneth to them all.*

If a man expects fairness and justice in this world then he is doomed to disappointment. Am I being too much the pessimist? I do not believe so. Man, flawed as he is, has created and always will create flawed society. Our consolation, and maybe even James’, though he was not entirely a religious man, is that in our Lord we have a saviour who is forever just.

I arrived in Gee Cross, Cheshire in August of 1870. I was forty years old, a teacher of some twenty years’ experience, most of it gained in the Unitarian day schools of central Manchester. Undernourished boys and girls would appear irregularly at the gates of those places, their young lives tossed this way and that by disease and illness, the temptations of mischief, the demands of family circumstances and, inevitably, the financial necessity of answering the factory’s call. The Sunday schools, which I also intermittently managed, offered many of them a second chance, I hoped. From one ministry to the next, from Gorton to Collyhurst to Cross Street, I was transferred like many other young teachers on the whim of the Church’s governors. I remember the spring day of that year when I was called to a meeting of the District Committee and addressed by a stern-faced, bewhiskered minister:

“Mr Rowbotham.”

“Sir.”

“Or may I call you Walter?”

I relaxed a little to see he had warmth in his eyes.

“Please.”

“Indeed.”

He leaned forward in his seat and, placing his elbows on the edge of the table between us, he clasped together his hands and rested his chin on the line of his knuckles.

“It’s time we got you out of this place, Walter,” he said. “This dark, insalubrious place. You need to leave Manchester. For a little while at least.”

“Do I?”

“Oh yes, you do, sir. You look most exhausted. Your complexion is as sallow as the poor wretches that you teach. We all heard you coughing in the corridor while you were waiting outside.”

“It’s a slight chest cough. I’m taking tea and honey each evening. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“That’s as may be. Nevertheless, if you have no objections of a personal nature…”

He paused and looked at me over the spectacles that had slipped an inch down towards the end of his long, smooth nose.

“You’re not engaged to be married or anything so awkward, are you, Walter?”

“No, sir,” I replied abruptly. “No, I’m not.”

“Quite independent?”

“Quite.”

“Then our proposal is to move you out of the city and give you back a taste of country air. There’s a job to be done in Hyde.”

And looking down at the open ledger that the fellow next to him passed across the desk:

“The Reverend Henry Dowson. At Hyde Chapel. You know it, perhaps?”

“I’m afraid not. Is it so very far away? I have friends here I would be reluctant to leave behind.”

“Not at all. Not at all. Though it is, strictly speaking, in Cheshire. Eight miles to the east. Hardly a pilgrimage. But a different world entirely: countryside, don’t you know? God’s own emerald hills, crystal streams, heavenly air as fresh as you could ever breathe. You’ll take up the position, I hope, Walter? Yes? Once you find your feet over there you’ll not be wanting to come back to Manchester ever again.”

I was confident that the hills to the east of Hyde would not be of emerald hue. After all, I was born and bred in the nearby town of Oldham and was familiar with the washed-out green of windswept Pennine slopes. What did surprise me, however, was that Hyde Chapel, an imposing edifice with a tall, narrow spire, surrounded by a large rectangle of parkland, much of it devoted to a cemetery, was not strictly speaking situated in Hyde at all. As the tight little streets of that fast-grown town, born of industrialization, sat amongst their mills and their mines by the coiling course of the river Tame, the chapel that bore its name lay a full mile away: my new workplace was on the upland, indeed on the very edge of the hills in the long-established village of Gee Cross where there was much toing and froing amongst the folk. There were mills here too, small and large, but I also discovered in this place a multitude of thriving little businesses, generations old, from bootmakers to wheelwrights, from hatters to drapers, from grocers and butchers to carpenters, from farmers to beer-sellers and blacksmiths. And the old minister was right in one respect: after the dampness and smoke of the city, here I found the air to be clean, the summer breezes to be sweet and the soft water brooks sparkled like jewels in the sunlight.

Little Charlie Knott was one of the children in the first Sunday school group I taught in the classroom across the lane from the chapel yard. By a coincidence the lane shared his family name so his was an easy one for me to remember. He was keen to let me know that he preferred Charlie to Charles but on that first occasion he had little else to say to me. He must have been seven or eight years old at the time. As he fixed me with his pale blue eyes I could feel him scrutinizing me, deciding if he could trust me, suspicious that I might suddenly lose my temper and rant at the children as, so I was told, my predecessor had been wont to do. During a final hymn and our communal prayer I could hear the murmur of parents already gathering outside the door. At the end of the class I spotted a woman with a shock of curly, greying hair signal the boy to come to her, take him firmly by the hand and then, without a word to me, she led him off down the street towards the Gerrards.

It took Charlie a little time to open up in Sunday school. He was one of the weakest readers but had an inquisitive spirit and once he had the measure of me as a teacher he did not hesitate to speak his mind and ask, however innocently, what I found to be incisive questions. For example: *If God loves us, why is my sister so poorly? Why is the prodigal son* (he pronounced it “progidal”) *rewarded more than the faithful son? Why does God let little children die?* His response to my attempts to answer him was always polite but non-committal. A shrug told me that he would need more time to consider the matter.

His sister, an older girl named Mary, was not ill for so very long. She was a fragile person to look at, pallid and thin with straggly curls, but she had a sweet smile and her eyes shone with life when she spoke. She developed a habit of collecting her brother after school, often stopping for a brief conversation with the other adults whom she knew, and, on occasion, with me, thanking me for helping the boy with his alphabet. Yes, she could read a little, she said shyly, but her education had ended a few years ago when she had been offered work with her mother as a weaver.

The next time I saw the children’s parent, the grey-haired Mrs Knott, she made a point of waiting until the classroom had emptied before approaching to address me directly. Her son was on his hands and knees tidying a row of books, oblivious to our conversation.

“Mr Rowbotham,” she began. “May I speak with you?”

“Surely, Mrs Knott,” I replied with a smile. “How can I be of help?”

The woman hesitated and coughed quietly to clear her throat.

“I was hopin’,” she said, “there’d be a space at the day school for Charles.”

“The day school here at the chapel?”

“Well, yes. If there’d be a space. He is a scholar at the mill school, but it’s only a few hours a week and I believe the schoolmistress there is overwhelmed by infants. She’s no time to spend with the older ones and Charles tells me he is oftentimes left to himself. He is unable to understand the lessons without guidance, Mr Rowbotham, and I fear he is learnin’ very little.”

“He is a bright boy, for sure. It’s a shame his curiosity is being frustrated.”

The woman was waiting for more.

“I could find a space for Charlie here, I suppose. Two or three mornings a week perhaps, but as you know…”

“I can pay, Mr Rowbotham. I have money to pay you.”

“Please, Mrs Knott, have a seat,” I said, indicating one of the chairs close to the desk I had set in the corner of the room. “Is Charlie contented there by the bookshelf, making himself useful? I think he most certainly is. He seems to be fascinated by the school bell. Come, Mrs Knott, let us have a look together at my register.”

I was delighted to have a boy as quick-witted as Charlie Knott join the school. Before long he was coming up every day of the week, neither rain nor cold undermining his enthusiasm to attend. He lived a mile from the chapel at the very bottom of the steep valley where the village petered out and the lane led into the woods. In my early weeks here I had walked down the Gerrards on several occasions to visit a family or two and to get my bearings in this unfamiliar environment. Beyond this point, as the ancient turnpike swung south towards the town of Stockport five miles distant, the narrow lane continued westwards, ever descending through the fields and farmyards, over a pair of stone railway arches until it finally brought into view clusters of terraced cottages, sheltered by woodland and set in the dark shadows of two large, rattling mills. Brown of brick and less than a quarter of a mile apart, their chimneys sent coal smoke billowing high into the sky. Firstly on the side of the canal stood Apethorn Mill, and then even deeper into the pit of the tree-tangled valley, where it seemed to me that the sunlight could only fail to penetrate, I discovered Gibraltar Mill: equally severe, equally imposing, built squarely in the gloom on the damp banks of the Tame.

The boy was allowed to walk to school alone. According to her hours at the mill Mary would oftentimes collect him at the end of lessons but I rarely saw their mother. In her stead, and providing prompt payments in monthly instalments on her behalf, I came to make the acquaintance of her cousin, or step-cousin as he insisted: an elderly-looking gentleman, self-possessed and with soft, intelligent eyes beneath a wrinkled brow. On the very first occasion we met, he stepped into the classroom just as I was on the point of leading the children in our closing prayer. They were standing in silence with their hands together, eyes opening in ones and twos as the door creaked and the fellow shuffled past them to approach me. For a moment I was startled by his presence, I have to admit.

“We are very much obliged to you, sir,” he said in a quiet, raspy voice. “For takin’ in our Charlie. Very much obliged.”

And offering me a hand to shake, he added somewhat self-consciously:

“I’m the lad’s mother’s step-cousin. I’m pleased to meet you. My name is James Shore.”

And so began a friendship which lasted until the Lord called him away from us all nine years later.

When the time came for Charlie to start working (as an assistant to a boilerman at Gibraltar Mill), James insisted that he continue to attend Sunday school. The boy was willing to help me with the infants, and, although he was unconvincing in matters of religious instruction, he took some of my own reading and writing groups whenever I was indisposed. For all of Charlie’s progress, the education of James himself was becoming of greater interest to me and satisfaction to us both. It began when he asked me to listen to him read a page of a book of Bible stories Charlie had taken home. The boy had tried to teach him to read a whole page aloud but had lacked the patience to finish the task. James was unembarrassed by his stumblings. Here was a man who had lived his life without formal instruction, who had signed his marriage certificate with a cross, yet who had such an appetite for knowledge and self-improvement that I could refuse him nothing of my time and energy. For indeed, the better I knew him, the more I felt that he had something to teach me too.

By this point in his life he was considered by his employer at the mill to be incapable of a full day’s labour. He would trudge the mile up the long hill to the top of the village, knock on my door, sit in an armchair in my study, light a pipe, and we would talk together about whatever was on his mind until the candles burned out: village gossip, his family, his younger days, my work, my piano, oftentimes politics. And by no means entirely seriously. He would joke, he would recognise foolishness, would bark at the ridiculous, would smile at the absurd; he was not such a solemn man. On each occasion, however, he would ask me to hear him read aloud from a newspaper or a book, demanding that I correct his mistakes. Many times I had to insist that he leave (it was late, I was hungry, I was tired, I had an errand to run, preparation to finish) but I did so with a heavy heart, so unwilling was I to disappoint him. I would stand on the doorstep and see him head off down the lane, with a little back-handed wave to show he knew I was watching him.

And so his life, the life of James Shore, a humble machine-worker, a convict, a cotton-packer, for a while the best-dressed man in the village, an ordinary Hydonian with an extraordinary story to tell – this life of his gradually became as familiar to me as my own. Gestating in my mind long after the fellow had passed on, it is a tale that I have decided deserves to be told. Please indulge my tendency to be teacherly which I have done my best to rein in. I also readily admit to my fondness for the man, but here, with neither favour nor slant, is what over the years I came to know about him. This is the story of James Shore.