

Tom, dear Tom

A short story by Jeremy Spencer



Happy Christmas, my name is Benjamin Stock, short for Rodenstock, my grandparents of Jewish descent came to England from Germany during the early nineteenth century, and as was a common procedure, they entered England and became nominally Catholic in order to make some headway in their business -- stables and the blacksmith profession. They started at the bottom in some ways, but they had enough capital to get a good head start socially with others of similar backgrounds. The business grew, and my parents passed it on to me. It was during my

ownership that the business thrived at its peak, and a lot of that was due to Tom.

Let me tell you about him, as he doesn't want to toot his own trumpet. He came into my office, which was on the business' premises with my desk parked by the window that overlooked the stables and most of the comings and goings. I was careful to monitor the work habits of my employees and I was a hard taskmaster. In those days I would have most likely been regarded as a veritable Scrooge, should the character have been invented. I did not observe Christmas in full, being Jewish under the skin. Was I married? Yes. I had a hardy, faithful little wife who I dearly loved and two children at that time, a boy and a girl.

Tom. He was a skinny, pale fifteen year-old seeking labour, standing in my office clutching his cap against his chest in the manner typical in today's movies depicting those times. Very respectful, punctuating his rather common speech with 'yissir'! I offered him the minimum for which he was grateful and I put him on the most menial of tasks under one of my subordinates. Tom began as barely a stable hand.

Why did I hire him? I had inherited a deeply suspicious and guarded nature that granted nobody the virtue of doing things without selfish motive. Everyone had an 'angle' as you say nowadays, and Tom's motive would have been his near poverty; an easy one to spot and to manipulate.

But I had another reason to hire him; I liked the boy. Why? Something in his face that would have been difficult to explain at the time. Now I see that it was a sparkle and sincerity in his eyes, along with an eagle-eyed awareness that made one feel uncomfortable sometimes, or at least me, when they met mine. Yet I felt as if I knew him.

Let me say a little more about eyes, his in particular, because in retrospect I can see what it was that made me trust him, although I was unaware of it then. Now I say that the discomfort I felt when he looked at me was only on occasion, and it was due to my sense of shame in the face of his ... purity? Innocence? Those aren't the right words. Compassion, maybe. Plain love, for want of a better word, and really there is no better.

The sad part which still causes me chagrin, is that at first I treated him terribly; taking an almost sadistic pleasure out of snapping at him and yelling at him from my office window, shaming him in front the other stable boys who would join me in my sport, to which he would utter nary a peep. That infuriated me, doubling my shame back on my own head.

Nevertheless, I observed him when he knew no one was looking. Besides speaking gently to the horses, workmates and customers, he was attentive to details. If something such as a bale of hay was out of place, he would straighten it and sweep the loose straw around it. He would pick up litter, move a plank with a nail sticking up that could cause injury, and much other suchlike attendance would he do. Most of this went unnoticed except by my watchful eye.

But ... my suspicion 'kicked in' as you say. I thought he *knew*. So I called him up into my office one day and asked him if he was aware that I had been observing him. He told me 'no, of course not', although he did say that the other boys had warned him that 'Stocky' doesn't miss a single thing from his office window. That struck me as odd, as for the most part the other workers' diligence paled against Tom's, and I told him so. I asked him why.

'I already have Someone watching me all the time,' he said.

I asked him who, and he said, 'God.'

Then he asked me if I believed in God. I told him of course I did. He then asked me why I didn't observe Christmas, and I said it went against my beliefs. He asked me to explain and I closed the conversation by dismissing him. But I thought about his answer. In fact I sometimes lay awake at night thinking of it, and wondered about that unseen, all-seeing Eye. I mused on my own suspicious observance and even attributed the same characteristics to the Almighty.

'How would I like to have me watching *me*?' I came to ask myself one night and felt such a pang of shame that I asked the same of Tom the following day; 'How would you feel if you knew you were watching *you*?'

He chuckled at my question, and said it was very thought-provoking, but he said he didn't know. He would only hope he

would be pleased at what he saw.

‘And how do feel about God watching you?’ I asked him.

Tom replied that he would find that infinitely more preferable as He would grant him more mercy than Tom would himself.

I was shocked at his answer; I felt it was almost presumptuous. I asked him what on earth gave him that idea.

‘Because I love His Son,’ Tom replied.

Despite my surging resentment of his answer, I asked him to explain. He thought for a few moments. I’ll try to put his explanation in Tom’s words as close as I can remember.

‘If you had an only son very dear to you, Mr. Stock, and a beggar ruffian came by your gate one day and began talking with him, and as a result, so loved your son, that he changed his ways and would come by every day just to talk with him, how would you see the beggar? Would you not overlook his rags, his past and even his present failings?’

As Tom spoke, I was picturing my very own son, and his ‘parable’ was crystal clear. I thanked him for his insightful answer and dismissed him. I said no more to him on the matter, but from that day forth, I ceased from hurling abuse at him, and castigated any that would. Furthermore, at the first sign of a promotional post opening in my business that would suit him, I secured it for Tom. His diligence followed him along with his development of wise, shrewd and above all, courteous handling of customers, which needless to say soon motivated me to promote him to senior partner in the business.

As stubborn as I continued to be, however, possibly due to centuries of an inherited ancestral resistance, it took awhile, maybe five years, for me to confess to Tom that I’d reconsidered the fact that God had a Son and that I was even speaking to Him on many an occasion; especially during a sleepless night. The wonderful thing was the sense of release I experienced upon making this admission and the happiness I felt at seeing Tom’s reaction.

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