

A Reflection of Suffering

Franky Cohn

FROM childhood I have known that many people suffer. It was, however, not until I was fifteen that I began to perceive the implications that suffering brings to man. Before, I had escaped or avoided seeing the world as it really is. I saw it only as I wanted it to be. My perception began to change the day I witnessed a young crippled boy experience defeat and disappointment in a world of suffering that he knew too well.

It was afternoon. All seemed bright and alive in the fresh spring air. As I strolled down the walk, I occasionally glanced back at my high school. It was there that I had won the council election. I was the new president. Everything was wonderful! I hurried down the street toward home and even passed by the alluring window displays, which usually caused me to delay. When I approached my old, motley grade school, I peered at its entrance and briefly recalled several exciting experiences I had once had there. As usual I intended to pass it by, but then I saw him. That day I stopped.

He was crouched beneath the huge oak that adorned the otherwise vacant school lawn. Each limb of this strong, straight tree was motionless, yet full of life with brilliant green leaves. In sharp contrast, he was tiny and ugly. His limbs were withered. His body was dwarfish. As I looked at him, his body began to tingle. In an instant his whole frame jerked uncontrollably, causing his head to roll violently from side to side. His ugliness was repulsive, but for some reason I could not leave. Moments passed. Soon the crude movements subsided. I continued to stare at him and saw that he stared too, but not at me. His attention was focused on the streams of yelling, prancing children that abandoned the school and raced toward the new asphalt playground. As we watched, the children gathered in a circle and began a wild game of dodge ball. The children never threw the ball accurately. It bounced everywhere, often rolling outside of the circle. He watched all of this activity without excitement. He looked sullen. His expression reflected that the game confused him. Suddenly, his throat worked and his whole body convulsed. For the first time his eyes left the children and fixed on an object much closer. The ball lay only inches from him. He responded with a weak grin. Then he awkwardly protruded his withered arms. He uttered a terrible moan as he desperately strained forward, but he could not grasp the ball. Unnoticed, a child from the playground had run after the ball. He stopped directly in front of the cripple. In an instant the child grabbed the ball far away from the straining limbs, cast a glance of hatred at the crooked figure, and impulsively ran back to his friends and the game.

After the departure the cripple hesitated only a moment before he tried to stand. His tiny fingers grasped for the bark of the strong oak. His feeble arms tried unsuccessfully to pull him up. He fell. Again he struggled for a firm hold. I hardly dared to breathe for fear of creating a motion that would cause him to fail a second time. After employing many wild gestures, each accompanied by an agonizing moan, he managed to pull himself up. Without warning, he violently turned toward the children and screamed, I can! I can! Yes I can! It was a pitiful sight. His cries echoed in my mind long after I watched him stumble away.

And so it happened that I was brought to the correct perception of human suffering and sorrow at a time of personal success and joy. Now, when I pass that oak, no matter how great the beauty of its motionless branches or how wonderful I feel, I see the dismal reflection of a tiny, crooked figure beside the huge trunk.

AFTERWARDS

A thousand trusting souls,
Bidding lasting farewells to loved ones.

A thousand angry cries,
Wailing, shrieking with lasting beats.

A thousand voices ringing,
Shouting, singing out war!

A thousand heavy footsteps,
Treading steadily on the beach.

A thousand silent bodies,
Lying quietly on the shores.

A small and quiet voice ringing out peace!
And peace shall be forever more!

MARGARET BEASLEY