

History Story Competition ; 'Because of Me'

This is a story that I do not really want to tell. This is a story of loss. This is a story of betrayal. This is a story of pain. Perhaps it is because I am ashamed of what I did, or is it just that it is too difficult to remember? Nevertheless, I tell you this story because you should know. You should know why. Why I did what I did. I am now an old man. It has taken me 40 years to find the resolve to tell this story, so listen carefully. I shall not tell it again.

It was the year 1839. I was working in the mines, as I continued to do for all my life. I was young then - about three-and-twenty years. My story starts in Tredegar in Wales - that's where I have lived all my life, and live still. I knew a man called William Evans - we worked together in the mines at that time, although I'd known him all my life. We were good friends, but always different to each other. My mother had taught me to read when I was a child, and ever since then I had found refuge in the pages of a book for comfort. William didn't understand this, but reading wasn't the only thing on which we didn't see eye to eye. William was the one who had told me about Chartism. He used to say that he had big ideas for the future and Chartism was the start of all that. I agreed with the movement's aims. Why couldn't all men have the vote? Why was there a house qualification in order to become a Member of Parliament? I wanted to be part of Chartism, and I was. I believed in that movement, I truly did. However, I did not, I *do* not, believe in violence. That was something I swore I'd never resort to, no matter the cause. This is where our ideas diverged, this is where they differ. William would talk of a man named Feargus O'Connor. He was one of the Chartist leaders. He believed in physical force. William said his ideas were just the sort that the movement needed. He said that 'the toffs would never listen unless we used physical measures'. I disagreed. My thoughts aligned more with other leaders. Leaders such as William Lovett. (He wrote most of the Charter). Lovett advocated moral force. He was my inspiration. For what cannot be solved with words? William persisted, however, his vain attempts to try and dissuade me from my views. He was, as I say, a good friend to me, therefore, I entertained these attempts. I would listen to what he had to say, despite having heard it before, and having already reached an alternate conclusion.

We saw our views clash in particular in the year 1839. A fellow Chartist named John Frost had been gaining support around Wales. He had a plan to march to a hotel in Newport where they were keeping Chartist prisoners. I was initially all enthusiasm at such an idea. The men should be let free. No man should be confined for wanting what he is rightfully owed. William and I had been attending the gatherings of Frost and readying ourselves to march to Newport. Frost spoke with passion and a conviction that drew in many. He spoke of freedom, he spoke of a system riddled with injustice. He said our working conditions and wages were bad enough and that by joining Chartism we could change all of that if we could just get the vote. He was right, the conditions were dire, and the wages made it even more unbearable. However, that is not what I have resolved to tell you. I did not think that Frost was right to want to use violence. It is here that my story truly starts. They said we would arm ourselves. They said we would be ready to use force. 'No William, I won't do it!' I said firmly.

'This is no time to be delicate.' he replied

'This is no time to be violent. There is never a time for that.' I replied. I could hear Frost shouting to the crowd, that cheered more loudly at every word, it seemed. I had to raise my voice for William to hear me. The noise escalated more and more and more, assaulting my ears, and the ears of others too. Frost shouted, 'We fight for our friends. We fight for Henry Vincent. His arrest shall not go unnoticed. We will fight back! End oppression!' and there were more cheers. The man next to me punched the air with quite some vigour. Watching this I realised just how much damage we could do even without weapons, and now they're talking of weapons! The crowd started to chant 'Down with the scum! Down with the scum!' I realised then that something had to be done. Surely this was too far? I was already frightened by the size of this crowd, and there were more coming. The shouts from around me made me start to feel uncomfortable at the prospect of what was to come, the destruction of it all.

‘Will you come? Will you come?’ William had to repeat himself because for a while I would not answer. I weakly replied that ‘Yes, I’ll come.’ I don’t really know why I said I would go, but I did. Sometimes people do things that they cannot explain. However, if I was going to be part of that event, then I was going to do something to prevent the violence as well.

Two days later onward we marched to Newport. William and I marched in the group lead by John Frost. We marched from Sirhowy Valley, but there were two other groups coming from Pontypool and Ebbw Vale also (although those from Pontypool never arrived - and I thank god for that now). We were marching to the West Gate Hotel. It was there that our fellow Chartists were supposedly being held. We were armed with pistols, pikes, homemade swords and agricultural tools. I didn’t agree with this. However, I *had* felt comfort that I had acted, as we set off with our weapons. That comfort would soon dissipate into bitter despair.

There was so much noise. I couldn’t stand the noise. A cacophony of all the sounds that accompany one’s nightmares. Shouting ringing in my ears from all sides. Screaming pummelling me from every side. Gunfire slowly desecrating my conscience with every shot. I remember it well now. I wish I didn’t. I had forgotten about it - not forgotten - that is the wrong word - I had blocked it out, but all of the details are still there, imprinted in my memory. A moment of chaos has a strange effect upon a person sometimes. Everything seems to go quiet, muffled, the way it sounds when you crawl under the blankets of your bed to block out the noise of the outside world - just for a moment. I never do that now. I wished at that moment that I could crawl under a sheet to block the moment out. I could not. It was only for a second that it went quiet. It never really did go quiet, that’s just how I remember it. Shock I suppose. Utter shock and a terrible understanding. The noise returned and it seemed louder now. Noise comes to you, it comes from your surroundings and enters in. The feeling I had was very different to that. Everything I experienced seemed to come from within me. If I was a lake or a pond perhaps and a stone was thrown right into my centre. That’s what it felt like. Ripples. Ripples that started from my centre and worked their way out. All feeling had left me. An explosion of emotion that left me limp, lifeless, lost. I also felt cold. A cold lake was very much within me at that moment. The catalyst; the soldiers. Yes, there were soldiers, the 45th regiment, firing right at us. ‘How did they find out?’ you ask. Haven’t you guessed already? They found out because of me. Me.

After the meeting I described to you, I thought I could try and prevent any violence. A person thinks they can do a great many things initially. Then they wake up, and realise that they can’t do what they thought they could. It is not a nice wake up. It is a fall. A sudden hitting of your head on devilishly solid rock. I had told the authorities you see. I had tipped them off, and said that the Chartists were marching to Newport - armed. I *thought* they would want to prevent the violence. People are much more heartless than you would first expect. They would never have tried to prevent the violence, but match it. Only match it - or better yet, top it. That is what they did. There was the 45th regiment. There were the soldiers. There was the response to my attempt to prevent violence. An armed opposition waiting to strike. Guns to the ready, they stood as if they were made of steel. They looked dangerous, and that they were. A moment of realisation passed through us Chartists. Shock. Horror. Anger. Trepidation. Countless emotions passed among us. However, we too were armed. What do you do when you are face to face with bullets and you hold weapons? The Chartists decided to use the weapons they had, to fight back. Meet violence with violence. That is the basis of this story. I thought I could remove that factor through telling, but all I did was exacerbate what I wished to remove.

It was because of me that at least two-and-twenty of my fellow men died, and one of those men; William. My friend who had stood by my side since I can hardly remember. Gone. Just like that, gone. Gone, just as when you focus on a stranger in the street, think about what their life may be like, and then they walk away and that’s it. Gone like the seeds of a dandelion that float in the

wind. Both the stranger and the dandelion seeds go because they are continuing their life. I wish William could have continued his life. He had run forward to fight and I had seen a soldier aiming at him. The soldier had a calm, focused, deadly look in his eyes as he made his aim. He delicately placed his fingers on the trigger of his rifle. The grace and serene focus of such a barbaric and brutal action makes it all the more menacing and all the more sickening. I still could not feel my body, but I would not let that stop me from using it. I remember running forward and calling his name for him to move out the way. Just one step, that's all it would have taken. One step. It was too late. The next steps William took would be into the cold shades of death. I watched him fall to the ground, as if he had just lost his footing, and I half expected him to get up. He didn't get up. He just lay there, motionless. I ran towards him. His blood, seeping into the cracks of the pavement. I wish it were not his blood. I wish it were something else. I wish that it were not even blood at all. There is no use in wishing. I wish a very many things in this story could be different. That isn't how it works. I clasped his body towards mine. I don't know what I expected would happen but he remained lifeless like a little rabbit that is pitifully slain and put on the table. He was still warm as the remnants of life melted away. My mother used to say that people had 'gone to sleep' when she meant that they had died. I wished more than ever that William had only gone to sleep at this moment. He *had* gone to sleep, but to the wrong kind of sleep. 'I am sorry' I whispered to him. Once, twice, three times and then I was howling it. Wailing that I was sorry. That didn't make it any better. Tears streamed down my cheeks, soaking my face in warm salty water. That makes it sound pleasant. It was not. It was unbearable. It should have been me. It should have been me. It should have been me. It wasn't me. It would be selfish to talk more about the anguish that William's death meant for me, because I had brought this upon him, and it was he who paid the ultimate price. Therefore, I shall not indulge myself anymore and tell you of my emotions as consequence to the event. You now know what happened and that is all you need know.

My actions lead to the deaths of over twenty Chartists, the injury of over fifty Chartists and the arrest of the three leaders of the uprising; John Frost, William Jones and Zephaniah Williams. They were charged with high treason. The Lord Chief Justice had ordered that they were each to be hanged drawn and quartered. Thankfully the public expressed their outrage and the sentence was changed to transportation for life. The event had led to enough bloodshed as it was. They went to Australia. It was a relief to know that people could do some good, and help those three men. That gave me back a little confidence in humanity. The people continued to send petitions to parliament and express a want that the three should be pardoned, even after they had been transported. They were eventually in 1854, and allowed to return in 1856. Only Frost did. That he was the only one to return does not matter, but the ability for them to return, I was pleased about. I think I was pleased because I felt so guilty about what I had done. I wanted the pardoning of the men because they were doing what they felt was right and I admired the cause. I felt responsible for ruining their efforts and causing so much bloodshed. I *was* responsible.

Now you have it. I have nothing more to tell you. Just know that, I was *trying* to help. I only wanted to help. I know you wish to know my name. I am sorry but I shall not give it. I want to be more than the man who betrayed his fellow men.