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## Now There Is Peace

RICHARD SHERMAN

The long, book-lined room was over-heated, and the air above the radiators shimmered in upward waves. Outside in the gray December street, whose traffic sounded faintly muffled through the magenta-draped windows, snow had begun to fall; but of the three people seated near the fire only the boy noticed the flakes, which seemed to be coming not from the sky but from the pavement below. The woman's gaze was on the portrait over the mantel, and the man looked into the coals.

Then the man shifted and traced a thin, dry finger over the leather of his chair.

"It was very kind of you to come," he said. "I know how precious your holy-day time at home must be, and Mrs. Bentham and I appreciate your courtesy."

"Yes, sir," the boy answered, and blushed. "I mean—I mean I was glad to come."

The woman's eyes left the portrait, to rest on her folded hands.

"Perhaps, Edward, if you would explain to . . ." She turned. "Your first name is Martin, isn't it?" The boy

nodded and she again regarded her hands. "Perhaps if you would explain to Martin why we have asked him here . . ." Martin spoke quickly, "I know. You wanted me to tell you about —" And then he stopped confused.

"About Arthur," Mr. Bentham said, and at the name his wife's hands unclenched slowly.

"But I can't tell you anything." The words came even more rapidly now, as if this was all he had to say and as if after he had said it he would leave them there alone. "You see, this is my first year at the school. Your—Arthur was my senior counselor, but I didn't really know him. He was older than I am, and —" "Yes, yes." Mr. Bentham nodded. "Dr. Abbott told us all that. Indeed, it was the fact that you were only slightly acquainted with him that caused us to send for you."

"Tell him what you want, Edward." "What we want. Yes, my dear." He rose and began to pace the room, retreating into a shadowy corner and then reappearing. "We are planning," he said, "a small memoir to Arthur, a little book or pamphlet which we hope will be a tribute to his memory. A tribute to the sort of boy he was, and an inspiration to others."

"Oh," said Martin.

"I have talked with various friends of his, his chums, and each has volunteered to write a short paragraph or two about him. Dr. Abbott and several of the instructors have also signified their willingness, even their desire, to contribute too. We want to have as many different points of view as possible. Dr. Abbott gave me your name as one who might picture Arthur as he seemed to a new boy."

There was a silence in the room, a silence broken only by the dull murmur of the street outside and the sound of

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Mrs. Bentham's nervous breathing. Martin himself said nothing, had no opportunity to say anything, for almost at once Mr. Bentham continued.

"I believe that I am not overstating the case," he announced, "when I say that Arthur was an unusual boy. Since his death we have received many letters, some even from strangers, testifying to his all-round physical and mental brilliance. Though of slight build, he was a splendid athlete —"

For the first time Mrs. Bentham lifted her head and met her husband's gaze. "So splendid they killed him," she said.

"My dear, we have discussed that so often. Simply because one boy is killed in one football game —"

"Killed for sport. Like a bull. . . . It wasn't as if he enjoyed playing." Martin thought that she was going to cry, but she did not. Instead, she returned to her former attitude of lowered eyes and folded hands.

"A splendid athlete," Mr. Bentham went on, his face serene. "A distinguished student, a leader in church and social service work — yet not a prig — and extremely popular with his classmates."

"He was." The boy's voice was earnest, and it held a note of relief. "Everybody liked him. He was a big man at the school."

Mr. Bentham smiled. "He was indeed. Always be a leader," I often told him. And he remained a leader to the end."

"Yes. The end," Mrs. Bentham said, and then her eyes found Martin's. "You say they liked him. Did you like him too?"

He replied without hesitation. "Of course; though I didn't see much of him. You see, he was always so busy."

At the mantel Mr. Bentham had paused, and was looking upward.

"Here," he said. "This is a painting of

him, done last summer when he was just eighteen."

The boy did not move.

"Come over this way," Mr. Bentham commanded. "The light is better here."

Rising slowly from his chair, Martin went toward him.

"It's a very good likeness, isn't it?" he said. "He was — he was always smiling."

"It's more than a likeness," the man answered. "It is symbolic of Arthur — just as Arthur was symbolic of the best in boyhood, in young manhood. And that is what we want this memoir to be too. We shall call it *Arthur Bentham: The Record of a Happy Boyhood*."

Looking about the room now, Martin saw that everywhere there were relics of the son who had been killed. On the mahogany desk stood two large photographs of him; a catcher's mitt hung incongruously near a family shield; and on a table lay several copies of the school paper of which he had been the editor.

"It is a source of great comfort to us," Mr. Bentham resumed, not as if he were speaking to Martin but as if he were addressing a larger audience, "that Arthur's short life was a completely joyous one. Fortunately we were able to surround him with all the material advantages that any boy could wish; and also we tried — and I believe succeeded — to mold his moral and mental character to a point nearing — he fumbled — to a point nearing perfection. He lived in the sunlight always. Never did he give us cause for grief or worry."

There was a pause.

"Edward," Mrs. Bentham said. "Perhaps Martin is not interested in all that."

"Oh, but I am," Martin put in, embarrassed. "I — I . . ."

"Of course he is." Mr. Bentham's tone to his wife was sullen, almost cold. "And so will other boys be, and their parents. In a way, you see," he continued, turning to Martin, "this book will be a guide

to adolescence. Not, of course, that it will be a moral preaching — we want it to be gay and high-spirited, as Arthur was, and vigorous and manly too. But by recreating his happy life, year by year, and by giving the testimonies of his friends and his teachers as to his character — by doing that we will be helping other parents and their sons.”

“Martin.” Mrs. Bentham stood and waited for him to come to her.

“Martin, why is it that you don’t want to write for Arthur’s book?”

Involuntarily he caught his breath in a sharp little gasp.

“But I haven’t said — ”

“Phyllis, my dear — ” Mr. Bentham turned from the portrait to face them —

“of course Martin wants to do it.”

“No, he doesn’t. . . . Do you?”

For a moment the three of them were silent. Then the boy looked at the rug.

“No,” he said.

Mr. Bentham started slightly, and a flush began to creep up his cheeks. Then he said, with quiet dignity, “I am very sorry. I had thought that anyone would welcome the privilege of — ”

“Don’t, Edward.”

The room had grown darker now, and outside the snow was falling thicker, whiter. Martin looked not at the man but at his wife. Her face, obscure in the gloom, gave no sign of what was in her mind.

“I — I’d better go,” he said, and headed toward the door. Mr. Bentham had already turned away and was fumbling a sheaf of papers. His back was stony, outraged.

“Good-bye,” said Martin.

Mr. Bentham did not even look up. Hurrying down the wide, dim hall, he heard light footsteps behind him and, turning, saw Mrs. Bentham.

“Wait,” she called.

He stopped, in a sort of alcove. Immediately she was near him, very near.

“Tell me,” she said, in a low, pleading voice — a voice different from that which she had used in her husband’s presence.

“It’s nothing,” he answered. “I’d like to do what he asks, but — ”

It was as if she had not heard him at all.

“Tell me about Arthur.”

She was almost touching him now — a slight, frail woman, only a little taller than he was, with great eyes. And then she placed a hand on his lapel, lightly.

“Don’t think that you will hurt me. Nothing can hurt me now. But I want to know everything about him. You have no right to keep anything from me, bad or good. Don’t you understand?”

“It isn’t bad. I never knew of him to do or say anything that was bad.”

“What is it then? Why don’t you wish to write about him? Is it that you think the idea is sentimental? It is sentimental, but — but his father wants it.”

“No. No, it isn’t that.”

Her hand fell away from his coat. “Then you won’t tell me. You will go now and leave me knowing that there

was something in Arthur’s life that was a secret. Something that you, who saw him only a few times, were aware of but won’t share with me.”

Their eyes met in a long glance. And then Martin began to speak, uneasily. “It isn’t important. I told you it wasn’t important. . . . I liked him a lot, even the first time I saw him. He was nice to me, not conceited the way most senior counselors are. He talked to me about my studies, and about what activities I should go out for. ‘If ever you get in trouble,’ he said, ‘or if you’re homesick, come and see me.’ He was that way with everybody.”

“Yes,” she knew. “One afternoon, the day before he was — the day before the game, I went to him. I didn’t have anything on my mind except maybe that I was a little

homesick, as he said I might be. I knocked at his door, and no one answered. Then I knocked again, and waited. Somehow I felt that he was there, and I thought maybe he hadn't heard me. So I opened the door. I shouldn't have done it, but I did."

He stopped, but the pressure of her hand made him go on.

"He was crying. That's all. He was sitting in a chair with his head down and he was crying. You see, it's really nothing at all. But I can't forget it."

He waited for her to speak.

"Why should he cry?" he asked. "He was always laughing when people were around. Why should he cry up there alone?"

Mrs. Bentham's voice was hardly a whisper.

"I found him that way once too," she said. "A year ago."

"And don't you know why either?" He was insistent now, demanding. "Didn't he tell you?"

She had turned away from him, and was looking at the closed door at the end of the hall.

"He didn't have to tell me," she said. "I knew."

"But I can't understand." . . .

Now she was facing him again, and she placed her hands on his shoulders.

"I don't know who your mother and father are," she said. "But tell them to let you be what you are, not what they want you to be."

For a moment he waited for her to continue; and when he saw that she only wanted to be left alone, he turned away and began to walk down the hall. At the head of the stairs she called, "Thank you, Martin."

He walked down the stairs and out of the house and into a world of white.

### I PLAIN SENSE

#### Survival Through Extending Yourself

Only rarely do writers attempt to create a major character in a story who never actually appears. Our main interest in "Now There Is Peace" is in Arthur and the mystery of his life. But we know Arthur only through what other people say about him. We have to read behind the lines and put together the picture very much the way we work a jigsaw puzzle.

1. How was Arthur killed?
2. Who first suspects that Martin does not want to write for Arthur's book?
3. Why doesn't Martin's disclosure about Arthur shock Mrs. Bentham?

### II IMPLICATIONS

Discuss the following statements that grow out of the story.

1. Arthur was struggling to survive just as much as were the Eskimo, the bear, and the fox in "Blood on the Ice."

2. Arthur had already given up the struggle to survive before his death.

3. Parents should not put pressure on their children.

4. Mrs. Bentham has learned how to survive but her son had not.

5. Had he lived, Arthur probably would have been a very successful person.

### III READING LITERATURE

#### Story Patterns

1. Where did you first suspect that Arthur's life was not quite the way his father pictured it?
2. In this story the pattern is made by putting together the pieces of a puzzle. What kind of television play, motion picture, or book uses this puzzle pattern?