Friends of Freedom

The Valiant Sixty

Inspired by true Quaker stories.

By Sally Latham-Lawrence

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Prologue

It is a fascinating phenomenon of human behavior that drives us at each dawn to accomplish new things. This same impetus motivates humankind with every new moon, every harvest festival, and each new year. No less motivating is the calendar, which pulls us forward like horses before a chariot toward an ever greater vision of a better life.

This is no less true of the century mark. Imagine if you will the dawning of the 17th century, possibly the first new century to inspire teachers and scholars alike after Pope Gregory XIII adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1582 and divided all Christendom. Whether one celebrated the new era in January as a Catholic or later in March with the Protestants, the year 1600 ignited an excitement and a hope; a phenomenon which arose like the first birth of a phoenix, and repeated every one hundred years thereafter.

What is most interesting about a new century is its first citizens, a generation that sees itself not as an extension of its ancestors, but as a correcting force. Besides dress, philosophy, arts and science, literature and music, they seek to repair society. This last may well be attributed to The Unrest, the civil wars of the sixth and seventh decade of the previous era.

In this case, The Unrest revolved around the Protestant Revolution of the 1560s, which infamously culminated in the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre; a blood-letting of thousands of Huguenots in 1572. It was a battle won yet a war lost, for in the eyes of the children born in and around 1600, that unconscionable act—and too many others like it—bore in their souls such disgust, they were prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to replace the burdens of religion with the freedoms of a living God.

We begin with Charles I, who took the throne in 1625. The new generation not appreciate their king's attempts to work around rather than with Parliament. Above all, his lavish lifestyle was an affront to a tax-strapped populace.

God evidently didn't warn Charles about the Puritan takeover of Parliament in 1640. And with Oliver Cromwell stirring the pot in the intellectual center of Cambridge, it was only a matter of two years before the first brutal skirmishes of the English Civil War imploded the old way of being.

This was a conflict of beliefs which nearly bled the land to death; fields trampled by iron-shod hooves, and a people crushed by the weight of God's name. But on its heels came Parliament's righteous sword, seeking to break a king who called himself Divine.

Yet not freedom but something far worse was the result; a new whip in a cruel hand. Cromwell was a brilliant general…and a firm believer in scorched-earth tactics. It was not

the expected result of Protestant rule. Rather the opposite—there had been a hope that religious abuses and imprisonments might end when he took the role of Lord Protector in 1653 and quickly began to put in place the "Articles in Favour of Liberty of Conscience."

But where the promise of freedom had momentarily tingled in the air, was now a crackle of danger. England emerged from its war without a mandate. Instead, it was a powder keg more volatile than ever. This wasn't just a matter of Puritan versus Catholic; it was a matter of individual thought. Loyalists, Independents, Dissenters, and any number of religious groups each fanning its own spark, each demanding its own vision of faith.

Amidst the Protestant churches—some of them long-established—came the next wave of young people who always arise mid-century. They are the children of the new-century activists, spurred on by the rhetoric of the household in which they grew up and their own sense of what has gone wrong in the preceding generation.

This group called themselves the Children of the Light, later christened "Quakers" by a scoffing clergy. They would bow to no bishop, no king. They would pay no tithe, no matter the punishment—and such punishments would be fierce, because enforced tithing provided the financial security of religious institutions at every layer of society.

Nor would they pay the fine for missing a parish service. And when they *did* attend! Neither priest nor minister liked to espy a plain-dressed Quaker standing in the midst of his congregation, presenting arguments and allegations before he could draw his sermon to a close. They were smart-mouthed warriors who dared to argue, even accusing the clergy of being the "hired hands" of Satan.

When hauled before the magistrate, Quakers would yield no confession but that which God pressed upon their hearts. And they continued firmly in their resolve to keep their hats upon their heads, refusing even to take an oath before a judge. Thus they brought the entire fury of the court upon themselves. Worse yet, they embraced the humiliations put upon them, even parading about naked or in penitent's garb as if it were a badge of honor and not that of a sinful nature.

The resulting abuses of Quakers—the beatings, stonings, and imprisonments called forth from pulpits across the land and enforced by magistrates and public alike—did not and could not stop these Spirit-filled Christians. Hidden away in secret places all across the land, their flame burned ever brighter. It was a fresh rebellion, sharper than any soldier's blade, proclaiming freedom deeper than a Parliament's charter.

In Cambridge, a hotbed under Parliamentarian sway, members of the Valiant Sixty gathered—most of them not yet thirty; some still in their teens. Most vocal among them was George Fox, already punished and imprisoned repeatedly by his mid-twenties.

Eventually he removed himself to the relative safety of York to preach and minister. And among those swept up in his message was a young scholar from the back country.

Born into a pious household, George Whitehead was marked out for better things—quick of mind and steady of character, raised under the sober preaching of the Presbyterians, where sermons were long, prayers well-measured, and obedience to elders absolute. His parents hoped he might one day stand in a pulpit of good repute, a steady minister among the God-fearing.

But something in him broke free. The catechisms, the rules, the distant talk of a chosen people rang hollow in his chest, while the voice of the Spirit, speaking straight to his heart, rang true. By his seventeenth year, he had abandoned every carefully laid plan: no minister's gown, no secure stipend, no nod from a council of elders. Instead, he put on a plain coat and went about on foot, evangelizing in barns and dim kitchens, gathering souls wherever the Lord prepared them. A tutor turned traveler, a scholar turned dissident. And alongside him, like Aaron in the shadow of Moses, a young boy who might have known better.

Chapter 1: Friends Against a Kingdom

Cambridge, 1653

Mary Fisher, not yet thirty years old, and Elizabeth Williams who was about fifty, feeling compelled by the Lord, travelled down from the north to bear witness of their faith. They came upon a group of university scholars and entered into religious discourse.

The young men, seeking to taunt these brazen uneducated women, asked them how many Gods there were, to which they replied but one, adding that the scholars had many Gods and were ignorant of the true God. At this there was much derision, so that the women told them they were antichrists and that their college was a cage of unclean birds, a synagogue of Satan.

A complaint was made to William Pickering, Mayor of Cambridge, about two women preaching. He sent a constable to investigate. On asking them whence they came and where they had stayed the night, they answered that they were strangers and knew not the name of the place they had stayed. He asked their names. They replied, their names were written in the Book of Life. He demanded their husbands' names. They told him, they had no husband but Jesus Christ.

Upon this revelation the Mayor was incited to fury. He called them Whores and sent them to the Market-Cross to be whipped "till the blood ran down their bodies." At this the women knelt and asked the Lord to forgive him for he knew not what he did.

And so the executioner fulfilled the mayor's warrant, and did so far more cruelly than is usually done to the worst of malefactors, so that their flesh was cut and torn. The beholders of this brutality were astonished to see the women enduring the torture patiently, even singing, "The Lord be blessed, the Lord be praised, who hath thus honored us and strengthened us thus to suffer for his Name's sake."

Afterward they prayed God again to forgive their persecutors. Then as they were led back into the town, they exhorted the people to fear God, not man, telling them, this was but the beginning of the sufferings of the people of God.

From "A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers for the Testimony of a Good Conscience, Vol. I" by Joseph Besse

The Journey Begins

Cambridge, 1654

This day—this soaking-wet, miserable excuse for a fireside rest—was a perfect opportunity for self-denial. George Fox and a handful of his loyal disciples had taken refuge in a modest country house whose walls showed the battle scars of long years—smoke-stained plaster cracked in places, with the lath and rough beams peeking through like ribs. The air carried a faint tang of damp wool and hearth ash, while the rain rattled hard against the windowpanes as if demanding to be let in.

A battered kitchen table, heavy as an oxcart and marked by generations of knives, bore the remains of a plain, meatless breakfast according to the Friends' leanings: bits of coarse bread, crumbly cheese, and pease puddings. There also remained a half-empty dish of stewed beans grown from the garden. A chipped jug half-full of hearty cider rested on the sideboard.

The hearth smoked as seventeen-year-old George Whitehead worked it expertly with the iron, coaxing a reluctant flame from damp wood. Yet his movements were restless, as if no fire could ease his spirit, trapped as he was indoors by the weather, of all things. Across the room sat James Parnell, who being but a year younger than George had the small bearing of one who suffered rickets as a child. Yet his mind was keen and sat by the window at a writing desk, quill dancing over cheap paper, so absorbed he scarcely noticed the chill seeping through the stone walls.

George Fox, ten years their senior, finished his repast calmly even as a strong wind rattled the shutters. Afterward he pushed himself back from the table with a grateful sigh. “My gratitude, Friend Blakeling, for thine board and bread.” A half dozen others nodded their agreement and thanked the host.

That worthy man smiled benevolently at the woman beside him. “It is our pleasure, Friends, and all gratitude be to God who provided it for this very moment.”

Fox nodded an amen and his gaze moved to Parnell. “What is it thee writes, lad? More about Pickering and his lot?”

James blinked, startled from his thoughts. “Words for a pamphlet,” he answered, “that men might know the true Word of God. Not dead ink, but the Living Christ.”

Whitehead stood and snorted, half in approval. “They will call thee a blasphemer for that.”

James shrugged almost casually. “Have I not been seen the prison cell already for my letters to the mayor and magistrates? Yet I am none the worse for wear. They must know, the world clings to the printed word as if it might save, yet Christ alone can do that.”

Whitehead left his place by the fire and paced the room with a furrowed brow, his boots passing across centuries of grit. Fox gestured to Parnell and urged him on, “Read what thee has so far.”

James began with a squeak that belied his nonchalance, “Friends!” He stopped and cleared his throat, to begin again in deeper voice, “Friends, be not deceived by priests who bind you to letters without life. The true Word is living, active, and speaks in every heart. It is Christ, not the book, that redeems.”

“Aye,” Whitehead mused, “and if thee stand in that, no man can truly silence thee.” He stopped at the window, looking out over Parnell’s head with discontent. “We must be clear; the Bible shows the path, but Christ is the Light upon it.”

All were nodding, considering the sensible nature of the point, but the speaker was unable to match the stillness of his companions. To him, the silence of his religion was the most difficult aspect of it. At last, he turned, a spark in his eye catching the lamplight, and all looked up, waiting for his next pronouncement on Spirit versus the written word. Instead he changed the topic completely.

“I am still pressed in spirit for Norwich. I must go.”

The faces around the table showed both surprise and resignation. Some turned to the window, judging the downpour and timing of a sixty-mile journey. Others merely nodded—they knew his leadings seldom changed.

Fox grinned and broke the silence. “Then into the rain with you, Friend! A divine appointment is worth more than any dry cloak. We’ll send you with provisions if Mistress Blakeling agrees.” He gestured to her, but she glanced at her husband with concern.

The master of the house nodded agreeably. “Aye, she does and I do as well.” He nudged her reassuringly, “Not like he’s walking a hundred-mile like our friend Parnell.”

James laughed, shaking his head. “Except that we’ve just come with Fox from York, haven’t we, which will beat my journey half again. Best pack him a good meal.” He winked at Whitehead and the two exchanged grins. “We go where the Lord wills, eh?” George patted his back affectionately.

“I’ll have thee with me if ye want to go, Friend.”

“Nay, me boots’re still at the menders, George. Or I would. ‘Course I would.” All chuckled at this, except the scullery maid, who scowled even as she rose on her mistress’ signal to go make the parcel. To her he said, “Better wrap it up well, dear Bess.”

“Oh I am, Marster James,” she huffed, opening a sausage-shaped leather knap-sack to accept the fortifications, “but I can’t say as I agree with such nonsense. The morrow will surely be fine, and just as good a time to go.”

Her remonstrations met with no argument, and so she grumbled to herself and agreed with herself, to the great amusement of the room, finally lifting the packet and moving to present it to her mistress. Just then a small figure stepped out of the shadows and into the firelight. With a fright Bess threw the pouch into the air, and Fox was obliged to reach up and catch it.

“Oh, where’d ye come from?” she gasped, and fell back to the larder as if exhausted by the ordeal.

They all turned to see young Thomas Lightfoot, a ragged orphan. He was well known among the Friends for finding his way into their meetings, often sleeping by their scullery fires. He’d run from the workhouse so often they wearied of beating him; cursing him up the street instead. Nor would any tradesman take him on for apprentice. You never knew where he slept or when he might appear.

“I’ll join thee,” said the boy, voice thin but determined.

Fox laughed outright. “Take him. He could use a wash!” With a chuckle, he tossed the packet to Tom instead of George. “Guard that well, boy, and don’t eat it until needs must.”

Tom swallowed, as yet unsure of his boldness, but something in him burned to take his place among these warriors of Truth.

"Norwich waits," Fox declared. "And the hearts there are ready. James, thee will tend the Friends here. Young Thomas, welcome. Learn what thee can, for thy day will come."

Outside, the wind caught the shutters again, as if echoing that promise.

Whitehead grinned. "I welcome the company!" To Tom he offered a hand, "Come, Friend. Let us be about the Lord's work."

On this warm offer, the boy solemnly stepped forward and shook hands. He had a sense that in this moment, his life's work had just begun.

But in the background, Bess gurgled as if she would choke. To her mistress she pleaded, "Ma'rm. He's but a waif, aint he."

"I'm nearly as old as him!" declared Tom, pointing at James and giving the young man cause to laugh.

"You're ten if a day."

"Twelve I *should* think. Twelve at *least*."

Mistress Blakeling appealed to her husband. "The punishments have no respect for age, my dear."

Whitehead laughed at the womanish concern. "I will keep him safe beside me. You need not fear."

"But such a distance. Surely…!"

"I was but fourteen when I stepped away from my own hearth to minister, and trust that I was must softer in body than this hardy soul."

"Hardy!" Bess fumed.

But all was said that would be said, and then the room was atwitter as Bess fussed about the place making the boy ready, cramming a goodly hunk of bread in his mouth before kitting him up with the knapsack. As he ate with an obvious appetite, she tightened the strap across his back to secure the parcel safely against his chest.

Meanwhile George lost no time in packing away a worn little Bible. He gathered it together, gently replacing a few loose pages, then wrapped it in a tatted piece of linen before carefully folding it into a leather pouch made just for the purpose.

He then stood at the door, clad in plain though sturdy raiment common to a young man whose mother thinks affectionately of him—even when she questions his choices. And

there he must wait, for the mistress being inspired by his own preparations, produced from an old chest a patched woolen scholar's cloak.

As both women attended to Tom's person, the lady of the house advised the novice missionary, "In thy pocket is a New Testament; a bit old and wormy but I give it ye for greater comfort than even this garment can provide. Friend Whitehead can teach ye to read with it, that I do not doubt."

George nodded his acquiescence with a pang of pity for the boy, unused as he was to such manhandling. Even Blakeling contributed his favorite old felted cap; a bowl-shaped equipage which looked a fright, though all agreed it was "quite handsome" on the lad.

Bess could hardly keep herself from caressing his cheeks, but that tenderness being rebuffed and the bread being eaten, she pressed a bit of cheese upon him even as George tugged his arm with a melodious, "Come on then, young Tom!" And young Tom was quite happy to follow.

Thus they set out, two boys against a kingdom. As they crossed the threshold, the rain abated for a moment. Tom nearly exclaimed over this miraculous accommodation, but great hard drops pelted down again just as the ancient door closed firmly behind them. It was as if Heaven were saying, "This way lies a path of pain and suffering. Take it if ye will."

For Norwich

George didn't seem to notice the damp conditions. He patted his chest pocket, reassuring himself that his Bible was safely there. Likewise Tom downed the bit of pudding and felt for the knap-sack, regarding it as a bag of great riches for which he was solely responsible. His thin-soled shoes were no match for the cold mud sucking at his toes, but he gave it no heed. George had called him Friend, he who had spoken of a world where no priest stole men's souls for coin. That was worth a discomfort such as this.

They made quick work of the slick stench of the town roads. The lad even took the lead at times to demonstrate a crafty detour, which might or might not save a little mileage. The older boy appreciated them all, for they were designed to avoid confrontation and he was keen to get on without challenge.

They were soon on a cross-country march. A lifetime seemed to pass, in which there was nothing but the march: here a stream to ford, there a log to clamber over, and the constant change of storms blowing in and out across the sky overhead. It was all novelty to the younger, who had thought himself well-travelled, knowing all Cambridge and its outskirts. Yet within a few miles they were beyond the limits of his acquaintance. He knew of these

distant places only from tales told over cups at evening. George, meanwhile, had made these hills his mission field, and was quite at home.

When the rain slackened, they spoke. For the first time, Tom could ask his own questions instead of overhearing George speak to others. One of them made the evangelist laugh outright.

“George…don’t thy feet hurt?”

“Aye, they are yet well-galled and blistered from the trip to Yorkshire, although it seems within me that my health is good.” He grinned with honest joy. “This I thankfully esteem as a great mercy from God. For if my feet be not hardened, yet my resolve is enough.”

“My feet are hard,” Tom said with pride. “I don’t often have shoes. I did when I was small, but now I don’t need ‘em to keep the cold out.”

“Then I pray they are armor enough, Friend Tom, that thou art spared the pain of a blister.”

“My feet are too stubborn for blisters!”

“Do others think thee stubborn?” George asked, for he wondered how the boy had no orphan companions.

Tom frowned, balancing along a fallen tree they met in the path. George followed, the two of them for a moment like any boys in the wilderness. When they had crossed, the answer came. “My father said afore he died, keep well away from the orphan gangs. I run from the workhouses and other places because there’s always a gang and a leader who wants me to get in with ’em. Father said to stay near folks who are kind and religious, like the Blakelings. We brought them their coal, see.”

“Oh, your father was a coleman?”

“Aye!” Tom’s face lit. “Every morning I held up the bags—hundred-weight, they was—and he filled ’em and loaded ’em in the cart, George, so strong was he. At every house he’d take an hundred-weight on each shoulder and carry ’em down to ’cellar. Oh—look there, a toad. And on Saturdays we’d go to the country and hunt rabbits with his ferrets, and sometimes pick berries. And we had chickens in the back garden. D’ye see that old nag there? Poor thing…”

He paused to watch a farmer lead a dray horse into its stall, then strode on. “So while he put the coal in the cellar, I’d hand over the rabbits and eggs and other things.”

George could barely keep pace with the tale, but the boy’s joy in his father’s strength made him glad he had asked. He thought of the Proverb: *the glory of children are their fathers*.

And so they laughed, and when he could, George spoke to Tom of the Spirit. Both had known want, and neither thought to stop for the meal the boy carried. As the miles passed, they grew quiet, until Tom lagged further behind.

As day descended into dusk, George paused at the crest of a low rise. Six steady hours had carried them some thirty miles, and yet the greater distance lay in understanding. At first, he had expected the boy to beg for rests—and would not have begrudged him if he had slipped away entirely with the victuals—but now it seemed natural that Tom should, in time, draw up beside him. Together they scanned the road ahead, where a flicker of lamplight marked a village, smoke curling through the mist.

“Are we at Thetford?” Tom asked with a voice that belied exhaustion. He pushed up Blakeling’s old cap to view the horizon.

“Not yet,” came the calm reply. “We’ve another three miles for Thetford, but I know this place.”

“They might shelter us here,” Tom ventured.

George’s gaze stayed steady, reflecting the distant fire of hope. “They might. But we go as Friends, Thomas. We bow to no man but Christ.”

Thunder rolled all around them, echoing across the sodden fields. Tom swallowed against the crawling fear that twisted in his belly—not just the chill, but the danger. His exhaustion had sapped his bravery and left in its place visions of the king’s soldiers roaming the roads, and angry church wardens vying for their capture, ready to drag them to prison.

“Aye, George,” he managed. “We are Friends.”

Making their way along the cobbled village streets on legs half-dead from cold, George was vaguely aware the rain had turned to a stinging sleet which clung to the skin like hungry fingers. He worried again for the boy. Would that he were Wenceslas who granted warmth with each step for the lad in his wake. He could only pray for guidance and mercy to find shelter.

The lamps were few, the light they cast not much more than wavering puddles of flame behind their warped panes. Doors that had been cracked open slammed shut as they drew near, with the clang of a bolt and nervous shuffle of boots moving toward a window as their owners peered out at the two interlopers. George felt the weight of a dozen suspicious eyes, measuring him, discounting him as a spy, a thief, or worse—a godless heretic.

At last, they found a low, crooked house that showed a painted sign of a stag, hung so askew it looked ready to drop off its iron bracket. A dim glow leaked out between planks

where an ancient door hung warped on its hinges. Tom pushed closer to his guardian, hopeful but wary.

George knocked, once, then again louder, his knuckles nearly numb. His insistence was rewarded by a thin glow of light and a pinched woman's face, framed by a wimple yellowed with age. She scanned them, the street boy with his ragged cloak; the young man in plain dress, eyes sharp and blazing.

"What do ye want?" she barked, voice small but flinty.

"Shelter," George answered, steady as ever. "For the night. We have coin."

She glanced past him at the white flakes that were starting to fall, the wind now turning bitter. But she hesitated and held her ground, lips pressed together even tighter. A Quaker, maybe. She'd heard talk of such boys. Wild ones, dangerous if they spoke the wrong sorts of things.

"G'on with ye, we have no need of missionaries. See yon house up the way. *They* won't mind your lot, I should think." George knew the home she meant; Calvinists. He'd had words with the owner on a previous journey.

"They won't have us. And you are an inn. I see such men as travelers, inside with their tankards. Look at the boy and take us as your customers."

Here they both considered Tom, whose lips even in the light of the doorway were visibly blue. He'd set up a shiver as well.

"Would you have him die here on thine doorstep, goodwife?"

No the goodwife would not, was the message clearly written across her face. Nobody wanted a dead boy and no way to get rid of him, or worse yet his ghost. "There's a loft," she said at last. "Cold. And no proper glass in the window. Sixpence." This last she was clearly determined about, for she held out a claw in demanding fashion.

"Six—??" George stopped himself. As if in obedience to a higher voice he frowned and nodded, drawing out a tarnished coin. She hesitated, then snatched it, and stepped back to let them in.

The warm smell of sour beer and new bread washed over Thomas like heaven itself, even if these simple pleasures were beyond their means. His stomach pinched, and he let his mind drift to the crusts in his packet, a welcome repast for dinner or breakfast, either one.

The common room was dark, men hunched over mugs, barely raising a glance. Their voices fell, though, when George removed his cloak, confirming his garb as that of a Quaker. As he

turned to follow the old woman the voices rose again in suspicious murmurs. He heard one of them utter the word, “Trouble.”

Pulling Tom after him, the two caught up with her as she climbed a flight of stairs, then passed two empty chambers, each with its great padded bed and unlit hearth. Then up another set of stairs, steep as a ladder. She pushed open a small door that led them into an unlit garret. The hard wind cut through the shattered casement, rattling loose slats of wood nailed across the gaps. They could make out the snow that had already skittered in, dusting a broken pallet.

Tom stared, disheartened, used as he was to a warm kitchen hearth. But George let his bundle slip to the floor. Though the space was miserable, he set his jaw and forced a tight smile.

“It will do.”

If the old woman felt a pang of guilt she disguised it well, casting a disparaging look at them both as they stood in widening puddles on the warped floorboards. “Drying cloth and blanket for an extra penny.”

“Penny!” Tom scowled.

George declined with a brief shake of the head. She huffed, then retreated, leaving them with a last suspicious glance. He didn’t bother to watch her go; rather, his interest was in Tom, who seemed a bit shaky after the climb.

“Wh-what shall we do now, Friend?”

George had a thought to kneel together and pray, but the lad’s eyes appeared heavy. He instead uttered an urgent prayer like one seeking advice from his Master as he scanned the tiny space for some form of protection. He circled once and stopped, still praying but less with hope than a frown, pleading in his spirit on behalf of his young charge.

Then as if a light shone in the midst of the dullness, he impulsively moved forward, shoving a broken crate to the side. Behind it, deep under the eaves, was a great lump of hemp canvas. The sound prompted a half-interested look from Tom, but again he was dozy and seemed to fall asleep. George pulled the bundle free and was rewarded with a giant workman’s cloth, stained and a bit musty. He nearly laughed as he dragged it to the center of the little room and rolled it out.

Making a nest from the massive sailcloth, he half-carried the boy to the center of it and wrapped him inside like a babe in swaddling. Then he made a nest for himself and gathered Tom close, sharing what little warmth their bodies could muster.

And so they slept in that tiny attic, sheltered against the elements as the wind blew and snow danced across their faces, whispering stories of danger yet to come.

Wymondham

The morning sun broke through rags of gray cloud, though it did little to warm the cramped garret. George woke first, sitting up with a leisurely stretch as he formed the cloth into a makeshift dressing gown. He quickly located his beloved book, then with a strip of sunshine to read by, passed a pleasing hour in study and prayer.

Finally he pulled forth the victuals and roused Tom with a nudge. The two sat cross-legged in their sea of linen, first thanking God for the food before opening the little treasure trove.

“Father,” said George, “I thank thee that your servants’ needs are always met and thine lovingkindness never fails. We feast on the abundance of thine house. Now guide thine servants in ministry today. Let us be like Peter and John, whose boldness caused the people to marvel. Amen.”

The bits and pieces within the packet thrilled the two, for Bess had been generous.

“Herb tarts!” Tom exclaimed, holding up a small pastry with a promising smell of almond and currant.

“Here, now, crack open one of them boiled eggs first. And have a bit of cheese and bread before thine sweetmeat.”

They made short work of their meal, leaving themselves a pease pudding, a bit of pottage, and another tart each for later. George grinned and shook his head.

“Bless that Bess! I was never more grateful for a crust as that, eh Tom?”

The boy patted his stomach with satisfaction. “Aye, far better than the days what begin empty-handed.”

George regarded his young proselyte, noting his pale skin—perhaps even more remarkable against the fierce spark in his eye. “I fear you’ve had too many of those empty times, young Tom. I pray better for ye, though promises I cannot make.”

Tom shrugged. As if in answer, he jumped up out of the warmth. “I just get on with it.”

And thus their day began. The two stowed the canvas and quickly donned their gear. Tom gestured below him, “I half expect *she’ll* have a constable waiting on us.”

“No, lad, not such as her. She’ll not want a man of any rank looking too close at the premises, eh?”

They made their way downstairs, ignoring the cold looks from the old woman and a boarder glaring at them over his porridge. She nudged him with a whisper, prepared already to deny the boys any further hospitality. Without hesitation, George slung open the door and they stepped out onto cobblestone still rimed with the night's snow. It was time to press on for Wymondham.

With a fairer day and clearer roads, the journey passed in more amenable fashion. George even allowed a short mealtime, which they enjoyed as they perused the melting landscape from the shelter of a tree. Now without fear of damage, Tom wiped his fingers carefully and fished the small book from his pocket, unwrapping it's ancient oilcloth cover.

He knew the words written upon the cover, as his time in the streets had forced him to read the signs and warnings posted about. George then opened the book gently and guided him in the reading of the title page. There was some command of the letters within, and at the end of the session both held a hope of a full understanding given time and studious attention.

And so with hearts lifted in hope and praise, they passed the remaining miles in good conversation and teaching, arriving soon enough at the home of Robert Constable. This believer had been persuaded to the faith by one of George's dear friends, Richard Hubberthorn, currently imprisoned in Norwich castle.

Word had traveled ahead of them by horseback, and so it happened that in the central hall of Robert's home were crammed dozens of curious souls eager to hear him. George was anxious for news of his friend, but with a brief prayer (not so much for words but for humility and restraint) he stepped into the hallway.

Three men waited separately in the front parlor, their collars stiff and black and their expressions tense with disapproval. Local authorities of the steeple house, no doubt, where Richard had earned his current accommodation by speaking Truth. These were Independents; radical Puritans not so far off in belief as the Quakers, having refused the beneficence of the tithe-mongers, but they backed Parliament in allowing the continued collections, and the mongers could be brutal to those who had but little to offer. But more to the point, the Puritans were not interested in debate.

On this day, the representatives of the church had not expected quite so much in the way of youthfulness. Even Hubberthorn was ten years older than Whitehead. They peered out through the half-open door like wary crows sizing up a crumb. George felt their gaze rake over his plain coat, the lack of buttons, the untrimmed hair. Their sneers needed no translation.

"That him?" one of them muttered, loud enough to sting. "The child preacher?"

“Aye,” the other snorted. “They grow ‘em younger every year. Like fresh cabbages.”

George staid himself, though heat prickled up his neck. He did not see himself as a child, though they saw only a stripling with bare cheeks and a battered Bible. Tom shifted behind him, half in awe, half in sheer dread.

The Puritans at last stepped into the room, their shoulders broad with pharisaical authority. The tallest, his voluminous black cloak so long it was crusted with mud at the ends, addressed George with bored condescension.

“Bow to us, boy,” he said, as though instructing a wayward dog.

George lifted his chin, calm as a midwinter pond. “I bow to none but Christ, thou sons of Cain.”

A hush fell across the small house, the onlookers watching, breathless.

The minister’s brow twitched. “I? A son of Cain?”

George nodded. “Thou know nothing but envy and malice, which thee bring here to this house.”

“Hah!” The man laughed, but none laughed with him. Finally… “And would you then scorn *thine* elders? *Thine* betters?” He gave a snort of fury, addressing his fellows, “I will not be *thee’d* by this milk-toothed pup!”

George’s eyes flared, catching the lamplight. “I would scorn no man, but I stand in Truth. And Truth bows to no bishop, no king, no priest or *minister*, nor any other who would set himself above the Light within.”

A low murmur rippled through the gathering, some fearful, some admiring. Tom clutched the Bible in his pocket as though it might anchor him to the floor.

The priest’s lips pressed to a thin, bitter line. “*Thee* dare to lecture me?”

“I speak what the Lord gives me to speak,” George answered, unflinching.

For a moment, it seemed the older man might strike him, so great was the tension in the air. But at the last he only spat to the side and turned away, disgusted.

“Preach to these thine fools if thou must,” he growled. “Then see what comes of rebellion.”

They left then, cloaks snapping; in their wake a hush that seemed even louder than their presence.

George turned to look at his proselyte, and pitied the boy whose eyes were huge, reverent, terrified.

“You told him,” Tom whispered.

George nodded once, solemn. “Truth is not for sale, Tom. Not ever.”

The household gathered close, drawn by a power they could hardly name, as the young minister began to speak.

“I am a witness, having seen myself God’s Spirit at work among the people known as Children of the Light. Seeing them, I was induced to leave the parish priests, the ministers made by the will of man, having no divine authority from God, nor commission from Christ, to teach others; they being no good examples to the flock, by their pride and covetousness, contrary to Christ’s command.” He looked to Tom and nodded to acknowledge him. “We come to you, no longer servants who do not ken to the master’s business. We are friends of God according John the 15th chapter.”

Suddenly shy, the boy slipped quietly to a dark corner, keen ears tuned to every word. The new arrivals—many of them already convinced, some merely curious—drew close about George like iron filings to a lodestone. Tom, meanwhile, helped himself to the last morsels in the packet. If he were to judge by the bustling activity in the kitchen, there would be no lack of victuals at evening meal, though he had noticed the portions were small.

Yet even as he chewed, the thought gnawed at him, sharper than any crust of stale bread: a trial was coming. No chance of escaping it, no easy road around it. The knowledge settled on him with cold finality—somewhere out there, waiting in the near shadows, was a test beyond anything he had yet faced in his mean life on the streets of Cambridge.

And as George’s voice rose above the hushed crowd, calm and certain, Tom could feel it—like a distant drumbeat—that their journey together was only beginning, and his youth could not save him from the suffering that would yet be visited upon him.

Chapter 2: Storming the Halls

Spring, 1655

A long season of icy rain had passed over England, but at last, spring found its way back, bright with buds on hedgerow branches and a promise of relief from all that stung and chafed. The nation still bore the scars of war—bruised laws, trembling consciences, and a Parliament whose edges frayed with each new rumor of rebellion. Amid this uneasy calm, the Quaker movement flowered, carried by the feet of a thousand young missionaries eager to publish their message of a kingdom without kings, a faith without masters.

They were no soldiers—yet in their spirit there rang the high call of a revolution deeper than any sword could carve, as if an invisible line of Light advanced across the land, shining on every injustice it found.

It was a fair day in Bury St. Edmunds, the green buds just breaking open on the ancient oaks ringing the square. In the back room of a kindly Friend's house, George Whitehead sat at a heavy desk sandwiched between two long benches. He leaned forward, hands steepled before him. Around him the air smelled of lamp oil, new rushes, and a faint whiff of fresh bread from the next room.

George glanced from face to face—believers, simple men and women whose eyes still flinched when a bootstep fell heavy outside the door. This was, after all, no lark to pass a pleasant afternoon. Richard Hubberthorn had only just had his case heard at the Court of Assizes, which met in spring and again in late summer. The Friends had watched as the case against him for exhortations to a steeple-house congregation after the sermon ended was dropped. But even as he stood to receive this judgement he was charged with Contempt of Authority and recommitted to prison under that pretense. He yet languished at Norwich Castle.

Now at George's right hand sat a broad-shouldered youth of about sixteen, dark-haired and restless as a jackdaw in spring. This was George Fox the Younger, so called because he bore that oft-used name, without the benefit of relation. However, his fervor and quick tongue often brought to mind a certain resemblance to the older Fox's fire.

At George's left perched James Parnell, now eighteen, still a small young man but belying an intellectual confidence that warns those who behold him, here is one who knows whereof he speaks. A born pamphleteer, a bundle of broadsheets lay beside him exuding the musty yet metallic smell of wet ink.

"And Cambridge," James was saying, tapping one finger on the stack, "is ripe for a shaking. The professors there are no better than king's men, teaching their students to make

merchandise of souls and worse yet, to throw stones and dirt upon us. They know the slightest instigation leads to much worse than a few stones. My Declaration should land among them like a spark on flax."

Fox the Younger nodded, eyes bright. "Aye, their doctrine is stale as last winter's bread. What they fear is a witness who trembles at the Word, instead of bowing to a stipend."

Whitehead smiled faintly, but did not contradict them. He had learned the wisdom of letting the younger Friends carry a leading where it pulled them.

It was then that Thomas Lightfoot ducked through the doorway, removing a soft gray knitted cap made special for him by the lady of the house. He'd sprouted up since Wymondham with good healthy food regularly pressed upon him in spite of the Quaker preference for smaller meals. He seemed to be a project for the women who regularly remarked that he was still as thin as a rail.

"Tom," George greeted him warmly, "it is good to see thee again."

As usual the boy flushed under the attention, but he remained before them, clutching his cap and shifting from foot to foot. The young men waited to see what it was he needed to tell them.

"Bess sent a message," he blurted, "asking if I'd forgot her. Worried after me, she was." He held the letter forward.

George reached for it, pleased that his efforts to arrange a simple education for the boy had blossomed into an actual correspondence. And surely it was that the tattered missive was scratched in Bess' own hand, a quiet testimony to Mistress Blakeling's support of the same in her household.

James raised an eyebrow. "The woman of the almond tarts?"

George laughed. "We *all* remember Bess, for her hand is well guided in the kitchen."

Tom brightened a moment. "Aye. And she worries. Maybe I should look in on her."

George exchanged a knowing look with James. "It so happens," he began carefully, "Friend James is for Cambridge, this very day. And he needs a porter for this abundance of pamphlets."

Young Fox, concerned for the lightness of the boy's oratory abilities, stepped in. "Ye must be careful. Do not take this decision lightly. The Mayor of that cursed city had two men whipped not long back, just on word of their being Friends."

This revelation brought pause, but the Spirit would not be denied. It seemed now that the idea of the two journeying toward such an adventure was now writ large before them.

James leaned forward with sincerity. “A companion would be no harm, *if* you can keep your wits, Tom.”

The boy straightened, pride and fear warring in his eyes. “I can keep my wits,” he insisted.

“Then it is settled,” George said gently, glancing a stay at Fox. “James shall carry his testimony to Cambridge, and Thomas with him, to speak if led, to serve if needed—and to see Bess, of course.”

Tom smiled shyly, and for a moment the room felt lighter, as if the sun had blessed their mission.

Fox the Younger sat back, looking between the two travelers with some thought. “Only take care,” he warned. “The professors on high will defend their towers with sharper tongues than any sword.”

James smiled and shook his head. “We’ll manage. The Lord is with us, or else we would never go.”

George closed the moment with prayer, his voice calm and certain, reaching out to the Spirit as simply as a friend takes a friend’s hand. And so was set the next chapter of their journey: one bold pamphleteer, one ragged child whom no honest craft had yet seen fit to tame, bound together to confront the great Schools of Babylon, and the very heart of English establishment.

The High Professors of Cambridge

The disputation hall was a monument to cold learning: high arched windows admitting a meager spring light, shadows pooling beneath the lecterns like spilled ink. The walls smelled of damp wool and scorched tallow. Heavy benches, marked by centuries of solemn argument, stood ready to bear witness to another round of thunderous declarations.

James Parnell approached first, bold and bright as a torch, stepping straight into the arena where the High Professors in their pleated robes waited with sharpened wits. Their brows drew together as they beheld him—a boy of no great disposition, Quaker-plain, hair untrimmed, coat without lace or button. And his hat still firmly upon his head, which affront the scholars who observed from the floor would have gladly punished then and there with stones ready in their pockets.

Both scholars and professors turned to a wizened old man with hawkish nose, his body sinking into a voluminous black robe, with his doctoral hood across his shoulders like war regalia. Dr. Harold Vane, Senior Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Regius Professor of Divinity. He spoke with a booming voice honed from decades of lecturing.

“Have you come to provoke us, *Quaker*?”

The scholars sniggered at the great man using a derogatory word. From somewhere in the gathering crowd in the great hall, a bit of wet bread launched into the air and hit James in the back of his head. Yet he ignored it, focusing instead on his mission.

“I come with a question.” His calm voice carried through the ancient oak-paneled hall, steady as a craftsman’s chisel. There was no response except a deepening displeasure on the faces of the men he came to challenge.

“Ye call yourselves guardians of the souls of men, yet you demand the people’s tithes even as poor folk freeze and starve. Where in Christ’s teaching did he command men to tax the faithful to pay their shepherds?”

A low rumble passed through them as Vane rose, clasping before him a Bible filled with notes and papers sticking from every corner, the spine cracked from decades of use. He waved it like a weapon and spoke with evident relish, as if to toy with a foolish opponent.

“You err, young sir,” he replied coolly. “The apostle saith, the laborer is worthy of his hire.” He tapped his Bible with long yellowed fingers. “And as the scripture commands, those who preach the gospel should live of the gospel. Or would you have us beg?”

Some in the hall nodded, as if their champion had trounced Parnell in a single stroke. Tom uttered a prayer from his heart, but panic rang in his ears. He did not want this first foray to end with Parnell as a laughingstock.

James drew breath again, refusing to be cowed. “Then answer me this—if you take the wages of Christ, why do you preach a kingdom built on fear? You fence the Lord’s table from those too poor to pay, yet say they are welcome to grace.”

An under-professor watching from the stairway hissed and spoke up sharply: “You slander this university! We guard the communion from unworthy hands!”

James’ heart thundered, but he refused to shrink. “And who judges worthiness but God alone? You stand between a man and his Redeemer, and call that ministry?”

The dean, robes settling like a crow’s wings about his chair, lifted one haughty eyebrow. His voice glided with poisonous calm:

“Boy, you mistake disorder for freedom, and pride for piety. The Lord’s Supper is holy, and only holy men may approach it. Who shall guard the flock from wolves, if not its shepherds? We are the shepherds, appointed by God, and no raw youth will gainsay our charge.”

A ripple of approval spread through the scholars, and James felt the words catch in his throat. The great stone hall seemed suddenly to tilt against him, cold and echoing.

And then—Tom could bear it no more. His voice cracked as it rang out, small but fierce:

It was then, seeing Parnell momentarily falter, that Tom could stand it no longer. His heart pounded like a drum.

“You twist the Scripture!” he blurted out, voice rising above the debate.

Vane’s head whipped around as he bellowed, “Who spoke?”

Tom stepped forward, trembling but fierce. He knew all the words to say, whispered at many a midnight fireside among the Friends. “Thou art no shepherds but hirelings! And the Scriptures are no more the Word of God than your robes are holiness!”

A hush fell. No one breathed.

The great Professor Regis looked down at the boy, summoning up his most fearsome mien, borne of a lifetime’s practice of scaring the wits out of his students. Slowly, with deep voice he intoned, “What did you say?”

Not to be cowed, Tom foolishly pressed on even as James attempted vainly to get to his side. There was a wild gleam in his eyes as he repeated the arguments of his mentors. “Ye worship letters on a page and call it holy, but it is Christ who is the Living Word!”

Murmurs erupted from the students around him, seething with hatred.

A tall boy spat in Tom's face, crying out, "The Holy Scripture is the very Word of God and you would tear it from us!"

A glance up to the dais proved this was what the masters expected to hear, and thus it was followed by a series of shouts one up on the other:

"Blasphemer!"

"Unlettered cur!"

"Jackanape! Get *ye* back to *thine* gutters!"

James tried to intercede, raising his hands. "Friends, hear me! He means not to deny the power of God, only to lift your eyes from ink on a page to the living Word within you!"

But the professors would have none of it. Vane pointed a bony finger at the Friends. "Behold these vipers!" he thundered, voice cracking with righteous fury. "Deniers of Holy Writ! Cast them out, *now*!"

The under-professor on the steps cried out, "Seize him!"

The crowd surged, even as Vane motioned to the parish constables, ever vigilant at the back of the hall and up to this point awaiting his signal for action. They hastily set in on the throng, the hobnails of their boots grinding across the stone floor.

Parnell reached Tom and attempted to push him down out of sight, but there was no time. This child of the street, up to that point long adept at remaining in the shadows, now stubbornly held his head high. For which he was rewarded with the solid smack of a rotted turnip against his temple. James attempted to shield him with his body, and was shoved away by a pair of burly undergraduates.

A wave of students pressed forward, hungry for blood, eager to prove their own piety by destroying his. The hall seemed to shrink, angry faces pressing closer, as the boy stood in a storm of long unsated outrage. It was a blessing that the constables, as cruel as they were, parted the throng and pushed a wide swath of protesters aside.

"Back, you schoolmen, or I'll have you for riot!"

This purchased a moment of blank stupor, but youthful fury erupted again like a pot left too long at the boil.

“This vagabond has no place here!” This was met with a cataclysm of agreement and a barrage of items from paper wads to craggy rocks chosen especially for such an opportunity.

This last was too much for the officer who now had Tom in hand. He swiped out at the mass of angry boys. “Out the way, you fine gowns—let the law do its part!”

Rude apprentices from town, always glad for a fight, began to jeer and throw handfuls of grit and apple cores. Another lunged forward, striking Thomas a hard blow across the shoulder that sent him sprawling out of the constable’s grasp.

James tried then to wrest his friend away, but was battered aside, his cloak torn from his shoulders.

“Seize them both!” shouted the church warden, the ring of his truncheon slamming down on a bench, splitting the air. “Seize these disturbers!”

Thomas scrambled upright but the mob closed in, a barrage of fists landing blows. He could taste blood on his lips, though whether his own or someone else’s, he could not say.

Rough hands seized his arms, dragging him through a forest of kicking legs and spitting mouths. A boy wrenched Tom’s cap off and ground it under his heel, triumphant.

“Blasphemer!” he shrieked, flinging a crust of bread at him.

The under-professor, adjusting his torn sleeve, sneered down as the constables wrestled them to the entry and locked shackles on their wrists. “You will taste a Cambridge cell, boy,” he hissed, “and perhaps learn what reverence means.”

They were marched down the echoing corridor, heads ringing with the din behind them and the hobnails of the men around them. As one the group passed through a stone arch where the wind rattled an iron gate.

Tom held James’ eye for a moment, searching for courage in that steadier flame.

“Stand fast,” James whispered as they were thrust through into the lock-up.

A single candle guttered there, showing slime-blackened walls and a crust of straw for a bed. The door slammed behind them with a finality that rattled the boy to his marrow.

He swallowed hard, tasting the mingled copper of fear and blood, but refused to shed a tear.

Inside, in that rotting air, he felt a strange quiet gather in his heart. Perhaps this was what it meant to bear witness: to stand before the fury of the world and not bow to it.