

“Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.”

Matthew 26:52

Henry’s Own Story

Tim Kennedy

No rain had fallen for about twelve days, and dust dulled the roadside grass to the same gray color as the fence rails. Everything was gray—even the cows lying in the shade of a sugar maple seemed to be shades of gray, rather than red and white.

I had to hustle to keep up with Philipp. He’s my next oldest brother, seven years older, and his legs are a lot longer than mine. Plus, I think, he was anxious to get this over with.

We came into a patch of deep shade, and my feet were happy for the coolness of the dirt.

“What do you think they’ll do, Philipp?” I asked.

“I don’t know, Henry,” he said, but he smiled at me anyway.

Philipp’s always smiling, and his hazel eyes always sparkle—sometimes with a question and sometimes with a laugh—but they’re always alert and honest. That’s what people say about Philipp Martin, but I just know he’s the best brother you could ever hope to have.

Even though he’s older than I am, Philipp often takes me on walks in the woods and tells me stories. He especially loves the stories from *The Martyrs’ Mirror*, which Father reads to us almost every evening now. But Philipp reads them on his own, too. And when we walk in the woods, he tells me the stories he’s read.

“The martyrs are the true heroes, Henry,” he says. “Just listen to

this story about Martin, the painter of Swabia—who knows, Henry, if maybe he wasn't our ancestor!" Then Philipp tells me one of the stories. He knows dozens of them.

But this day he didn't talk. His eyes were fixed straight ahead. I swallowed dryly and hoped we would cross the creek again soon. My legs ached, and my feet were hot. I'm used to walking, all right, but not quite this much.

We had started out before sunup walking from home, going to work with a building crew in the cool of the morning. Many of the men from our church had volunteered to help Morgan Edwards, the Baptist preacher, raise his house. Not that we're Baptists—folks call us Menonists—but we like to be good neighbors. Father says one good *earthly* thing you can do is to help a man build a house for his family. So, even though Father and the older boys had to repair the gristmill today, he sent Philipp and me to help build the house.

The raising went well. Preacher Edwards had already laid the foundation, cut the straight logs, and dragged them down to the building site. We made good time before noon, everyone working smoothly together, each man doing his own job but keeping a rhythm with his neighbor. Everything was going well—until Michael Smyser rode up, that is.

Mr. Smyser is the owner of the Stoneybrook tavern. He's also captain of the local **militia**, a group of men who train to fight the British soldiers of King George. Well, that's where the trouble came in. Mr. Smyser started talking about fighting the king.

"Edwards," he said to the Baptist preacher, "Jesus never forbade a man to defend himself. I ask you, did the Apostle Peter order Cornelius, the Roman centurion, to quit his soldiering? No! Now, King George is the wickedest **brute** ever made a king of England—we must defend ourselves against his attacks. In fact, if it comes to war, *we* will be fighting for a *holy* cause!"

Morgan Edwards could see that the men who were helping him raise his new house were feeling a little uneasy. He tried to interrupt Smyser—but Smyser has a reputation for talking fast.

“The first great rule of life,” he went on, “is self-preservation! What would come of a nation if every man—” and I thought I saw him look our way—“if every man cowered before **tyrants** the likes of George? Some ignorant fools are saying it’s not right to fight! If you and I took that position—why, there would not be a single man left in these thirteen colonies for King George to tax!”

This time Smyser *did* look our way. His cheeks and neck were blotched red. We all wished for a polite way to excuse ourselves, while Mr. Edwards coughed nervously and tried again to interrupt Smyser.

Finally Smyser got around to the reason he’d called at Preacher Edwards’ place. He turned full on us: “Every man among you is required to **muster** with the local militia. No more special favors! If you don’t turn out . . . well, I wouldn’t want to say what is going to happen.”

That’s when Philipp spoke up. “Mr. Smyser,” he said respectfully, but with confidence, “we will never take up arms to harm a man whom God has made in His own image. Jesus said, ‘Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.’ Men will soon repent of all this mustering and war-making.”

I never again want to see a man as furious as Michael Smyser looked just then. His face heaved into a terrible scowl, and no one knew what he was going to do. But quickly Jacob Danner stepped forward and said something—I couldn’t hear him—quickly but quietly to Mr. Smyser, and Smyser spun around, mounted his horse and charged off. I sighed in relief, but the men started saying that wasn’t the end of the matter.

Mr. Smyser was riding into York to make a complaint about Philipp to the Committee of Observation—the men in charge of the militia. So the noon meal was somber and the conversation sober. Preacher Edwards did most of the talking.

“Life will be different now, friends,” he said. “Since last month’s battle in Massachusetts, people are beginning to take a harder view of the king. I went down to Philadelphia last week, and people there are nearly in a frenzy. Even some of the Quakers are mustering! They march through the streets, drilling and firing their muskets.¹ They shout threats about King George. And last week one of Philadelphia’s leading doctors spoke out against mustering, and a mob seized him. They coated the poor man with tar and feathers, paraded him through the city in a miller’s cart, and then drove him out of town!”

As I listened, I remembered the night when we first heard the news about Lexington and Concord. Father had listened to a neighbor tell the story of the battle, and then spoke quietly to us: “War brings a kind of **madness**, children. People become angry and frightened. Some men can think only about revenge—paying back evil with the greatest evil they can.”

Then Father had eased the huge *Martyrs’ Mirror* down from its shelf. He had read stories of the martyrs to us again and reminded us of their lesson: “The followers of Jesus do not return evil for evil, not even to save their own lives. As for us, life may be harder for a while. Many of our neighbors will find it difficult to understand why we will not take up arms against King George.

“I read a notice in the village today that said that Pennsylvanians must ‘furnish themselves with war-like weapons’ and ‘learn the art of war.’ But how can we practice taking up arms? We cannot harm a man whom God has made in His own image! No, ‘all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.’”

¹ musket: a heavy gun with a long barrel

So, you see where Philipp got those words!

Well, back to Michael Smyser. He hadn't wasted any time. Soon after we finished our noon meal, he returned. He said one thing: "Philipp Martin—get walking! You're to appear before the York Committee of Observation immediately!" And then he rode off, leaving us to walk three miles to York in the heat of the day.

Some of the others would have come along, but Morgan Edwards warned against it: "If the lad goes alone, nothing will come of it. If the committee has to face a whole group of you non-fighters, they'll feel forced to act harshly. Philipp, you go on alone. Everything will be all right. Even Smyser will be cooled down before you get there."

Well, *I* was going along, that's for sure. So, first we all prayed together, and then we walked; or rather, Philipp walked and I jogged. When I thought about that doctor in Philadelphia, I got a hollow feeling in my stomach and my mouth felt so **parched** I couldn't get my words out. A redwing blackbird whistled his summer song from the top of a beech tree, but I didn't even look up at him.

Finally we crossed the creek, and I was relieved that Philipp said: "Get your feet in it, Henry. We have time to cool down a bit. There are the roofs of York."

While I stepped into a pool, I looked west toward York, less than a mile off now. Philipp splashed a handful of water at me. We both drank our fill, and I wanted to ask Philipp a question. I couldn't quite figure out how to say what I was thinking, though, so I just said, "You seem happy." The dust stuck to my wet feet as we walked on, making a crust of mud along the sides.

Philipp knew what I meant.

"I've been thinking about the martyrs' stories, Henry. I was wondering: why were they so fearless?"

"Hmm," I had to think. "Because they knew what they were doing was right, I guess?"

“Yes. That’s it. And because they were doing the right, they knew God was with them, no matter what men did to them. Well, we’re doing what’s right too.”

I still felt glum, and a little scared.

“There’s nothing more that we can do. Maybe I shouldn’t have been the one to speak up, since I wasn’t the oldest man there. But I didn’t intend to offend Mr. Smyser. And what I said—it didn’t hurt anybody, and it was the truth. So, just like the martyrs, we needn’t be afraid.”

We had passed the stables on the outskirts of York. Ahead of us the courthouse sat beside the green. “Rest here in the green, Henry. I’ll go inside and see what they want. I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t want to be left out alone, and I begged Philipp until we were at the courthouse door.

“All right. Just stay in the back then. And let’s be praying.”

We could hear Mr. Smyser’s voice. It led us to a room where a group of men and boys were sitting around in the heat. Mr. Smyser looked up when Philipp came in. He started accusing him right away. If he had cooled down, as Preacher Edwards had said he would, I couldn’t tell it. He spoke very fast, saying Philipp was loyal to King George, and that Philipp opposed the new government.

“Some folks would like to cower in safety, hiding in their comfortable houses and big farms, while others fight to protect their liberty,” he said. Then he reported in detail what had taken place this morning, and what Philipp had said.

When he had finished, Colonel Hartley, the chairman of the committee, spoke to Philipp: “Is what Mr. Smyser says true? Did you say these things against the cause of freedom?”

“I did not mean to speak against freedom this morning, sir,” Philipp answered. “I only said that we could never take up arms to harm our fellow man. I reminded Mr. Smyser that Jesus said, ‘Put up

again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish—'”

“You needn't preach to us!” Colonel Hartley broke in. “We can read the Bible for ourselves!”

The men sitting at the table—I guessed they were the Committee of Observation—leaned together and whispered a moment. I glanced over the people in the room. The men looked quite rough, and the boys wore scowls or sneers on their faces. One odd fellow, about fourteen I'd say, clutched a pillow against himself in the heat.

Suddenly, most of the committee members stood up and hastily crowded out through the back door. Colonel Hartley and the other man who remained stared down at the table. Oh, how I wished I could see Philipp's eyes! The colonel began to scold him, but somehow, even from the back of his head, I could tell that Philipp's eyes were smiling, alert and honest, as always.

“Philipp Martin,” Colonel Hartley was saying, glancing only for a second at Philipp, “people like you are enemies of this country!”

Enemies? I wondered. How are we enemies? Father's mill grinds grain for all our neighbors; and Father pays his taxes, even the extra taxes we have to pay because we won't fight.

Colonel Hartley went on, looking around the room as he talked: “This man is loyal to the tyrant King George. This Committee of Observation knows of only one thing to do with a traitor: you shall be covered with tar and feathered like the coward you are!”

The boys in the back of the room snickered, but I felt my heart skip a beat and my stomach drop.

Philipp did not move. I saw his straight back and his hands resting at his sides. Then I noticed the tar box that was sitting on the floor near Colonel Hartley's table. It had all been planned ahead of time!

Mr. Hartley called Philipp to stand before the table, and while Philipp stepped to the front, the Colonel himself slipped out the back

door. Only one committee man remained. Drops of sweat covered his forehead.

No one spoke or moved for a long time.

Then the committee man spoke: "Someone in this room must carry out the committee's orders!"

Still, no one moved. At last the man said to Philipp: "If no one here will follow the committee's orders, you will do so yourself, traitor!"

Several of the boys sitting along the side of the room made sounds of disbelief at this command, but Philipp pulled back his shirt and calmly bent over and scooped up a wad of black, sticky tar. He dabbed the goo on his shoulder, and then one of the men shouted: "You committee men better do that tarring yerself!"

Other voices jeered at the committee man, "Do it yerself!"

A man near Philipp stood up. "Young man," he said gently, "you go on home. This is enough foolishness for one day."

Philipp didn't wait for any debate. He wiped his fingers on the edge of the tar box and turned for the door. He smiled at me and I smiled back. Just as we stepped through the door, the boy with the pillow threw a handful of feathers after Philipp, but none of them even came close. We were back out in the sun and heading for home.

We didn't say a word to each other as we hustled out of town. A couple of the youngest boys followed us for a block, but then they dropped off, and we were alone again. As soon as we'd passed the stables, Philipp stooped and wiped his hands on the dusty grass. He wrinkled his nose, but his eyes were alive with joy. Walking briskly toward home, we began to talk about the day's events. We both felt a great urge to get home—now we had our own story to tell.