

A Little Bit of Goodness

One of my Sunday school teachers in Bluffton, S. C., was named Mrs. Snyder. She was so filled with goodness herself that she could see it in everybody else. "Even the wickedest man in the world has a little bit of goodness in him," she would tell us.

Every time Mrs. Snyder said that I would think of a man whom I shall call Mr. Jimson. I just couldn't see how Mrs. Snyder, or anyone else on earth, or even God in heaven could find any goodness in that evil man.

He was a wiry little man about five feet eight inches tall with a dark skin, black eyes and high cheekbones that suggested Indian blood. He lived with his wife and 10 children in a squatty unpainted house on the edge of the town. A pack of mangy hound dogs had the run of the yard and barked at everything that came in sight. I was deathly afraid of those noisy dogs, and whenever I had to walk through that part of the town I would find a way to circumvent the Jimsons's yard.

Mr. Jimson's reputation convinced me that he was very wicked and very dangerous and much more to be feared than his mangy hounds. The things I heard about him were all very ugly.

The common talk in the community about Mr. Jimson ran something like this: "He's supposed to make a living farming those scrubby acres he rents out in the country. But he's no farmer. The only thing he plants is a patch of peas around a big oak tree, so he can hide up there in the branches and shoot deer in the moonlight. He raises neither hogs nor cattle. He steals every one he butchers and sells."

Every time a fat pig or calf disappeared from a farm, Mr. Jimson was suspected. If an irate farmer could get a thread of evidence pointing toward Mr. Jimson, he would have him arrested and brought before a magistrate.

But Mr. Jimson was never convicted. He always managed to prove, by his wife and most of his 10 children, that he was home in bed with a high fever at the time of the alleged theft. The judge would be forced to pronounce it a case of mistaken identity and dismiss the charge.

It was also common talk that Mr. Jimson's father had been a notorious outlaw down in Florida, and that his mother was an Indian, and that he was just naturally a "sneaky halfbreed" who would not only steal and lie but even kill for a piece of meat.

Those were the very words that popped into my mind that day

down in the swamp, when Mr. Jimson and I stood fact to face over a dead gobbler.

I had just picked that gobbler off a high limb in a cypress tree with my shotgun. I was looking for a squirrel when I spotted him, and without hesitating I aimed and pulled the trigger and down he came. I ran to pick him up before he could flop around and get back on his feet and run for cover in the thick underbrush. But when I got to him he was stone dead, so I just stood there with my gun under my arm looking at him.

I was so proud and excited, thinking about the way people's eyes were going to pop open when I walked through the town with that great big beautiful gobbler hanging over my shoulder, that I didn't realize someone had walked up and was standing on the other side of the dead bird.

At first I thought the old scuffed up boots I was looking at had suddenly sprouted up out of the ground. Slowly I raised my eyes to a pair of faded blue denim pants. Then quickly I jerked my head up and looked straight into a pair of cold black eyes. Then I felt the point of a .22 rifle tickling my chest right where my heart was pounding away.

That was when I remembered those words about a sneaky half-breed who would kill for a piece of meat.

I wanted to cry out to Mr. Jimson that he could have the turkey, that I didn't want him. But fear had paralyzed me and I was as dumb as a stunned rabbit. I could only gape and stare in horror at the cold black eyes.

In the half light of the dismal swamp the dark skin of Mr. Jimson's face took on a more sinister color. If he had worn moccasins instead of boots, I would have known that I was confronted by a primitive savage.

Mr. Jimson's lips moved and his voice was low.

"Pick up your turkey."

I knew that if I stooped to pick up the turkey, he would club me to death with the rifle. I didn't move.

"Three nights I put him to roost. Three days I follow him. Then when I catch up with him, I am too tired to shoot."

Mr. Jimson shouldered his rifle and walked away.

I was too bewildered to think, and it was several minutes before I could stop staring and reach down and pick up the heavy bird.

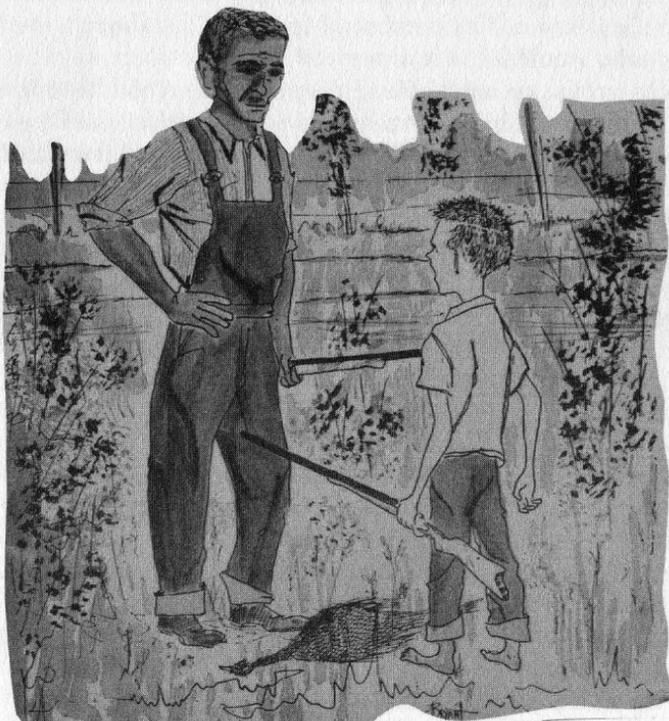
I held him in my arms and examined him carefully, trying to see where my shot had hit him. I found a little blood and a hole below his eyes. It was not a shotgun wound. Only a .22 rifle could make a hole like that.

Slowly I figured out what had happened. Mr. Jimson and I had fired our guns simultaneously. Mine was louder and I had not heard the report of his. Mr. Jimson's shot killed the turkey. Mine didn't touch him.

Mr. Jimson had said he was too tired to shoot. He lied. Why? Was he afraid I would report him for trespassing on private property? No. He knew the land was not posted.

There was but one answer. Mr. Jimson had seen the fear in my eyes. He did not want me to be afraid of him. He wanted to show me that he would not harm a boy, or even take advantage of him. To prove this, he gave me his turkey. He gave me the meat that he had spent three days and three nights trying to obtain, probably because his family needed it very much.

I knew that I would never have had the courage to go to Mr. Jimson's house and thank him for what he had done. But I had no doubt that I would be eternally grateful both to him and Mrs. Snyder for teaching me that every man in the world has a little bit of goodness in him, no matter how "wicked" he is.



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