

Our First Great Painter

by James Baldwin

A long time ago there lived, in Pennsylvania, a little boy whose name was Benjamin West.

This boy loved pictures. Indeed, there were few things that he loved more. But he had never seen any pictures except a few small ones in a book. His father and mother were Quakers, and they did not think it was right to spend money for such things. They thought that pictures might take one's mind away from things that were better or more useful.

One day Benjamin's mother had to go to a neighbor's on some errand. So she told Benjamin to stay in the house and take care of his baby sister till she came back.

He was glad to do this; for he loved the baby.

"Yes, mother," he said, "I will watch her every minute. I won't let anything hurt her."

The baby was asleep in her cradle, and he must not make a noise and waken her. For some time he sat very still. He heard the clock ticking. He heard the birds singing. He began to feel a little lonesome.

A fly lighted on the baby's cheek, and he brushed it away. Then he thought what a pretty picture might be made of his sister's sweet face and little hands.

He had no paper, but he knew where there was a smooth board. He had no pencil, but there was a piece of black charcoal on the hearth. How pretty the baby was! He began to draw. The baby smiled but did not wake up.

As often as he touched the charcoal to the smooth board, the picture grew. Here was her round head, covered with pretty curls. Here was her mouth. Here were her eyes, and here her dainty ears. Here was her fat little neck. Here were her wonderful hands.

So busy was he with the drawing that he did not think of anything else. He heard neither the clock nor the birds. He did not even hear his mother's footsteps as she came into the room. He did not hear her soft breathing as she stood over him and watched him finish the wonderful drawing. "O Benjamin! what has thee been doing?" she cried.

The lad sprang up alarmed.

"It's only a picture of the baby, mother," he said.

"A picture of the baby! Oh, wonderful! It looks just like her!"

The good woman was so overjoyed that she caught him in her arms and kissed him. Then suddenly she began to wonder whether this was right.

"Benjamin, how did thee learn to draw such a picture?" she asked.

"I didn't learn," he answered. "I just did it. I couldn't help but do it."

When Benjamin's father came home, his mother showed him the picture. "It looks just like her, doesn't it?" she said. "But I am afraid. I don't know what to think. Does thee suppose that it is very wrong for Benjamin to do such a thing?"

The father did not answer. He turned the picture this way and that, and looked at it from every side. He compared it with the baby's pretty face. Then he handed it back to his wife and said:—

"Put it away. It may be that the hand of the Lord is in this."

Several weeks afterward, there came a visitor to the home of the Wests. It was a good old Friend, whom everybody loved—a-white-haired, pleasant-faced minister, whose words were always wise.

Benjamin's parents showed him the picture. They told him how the lad was always trying to draw something. And they asked what they should do about it.

The good minister looked at the picture for a long time. Then he called little Benjamin to him. He put his hands on the lad's head and said:—

"This child has a wonderful gift. We cannot understand it nor the reason of it. Let us trust that great good may come from it, and that Benjamin West may grow up to be an honor to our country and the world."

And the words of the old minister came true. The pictures of Benjamin West made him famous. He was the first great American painter.

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