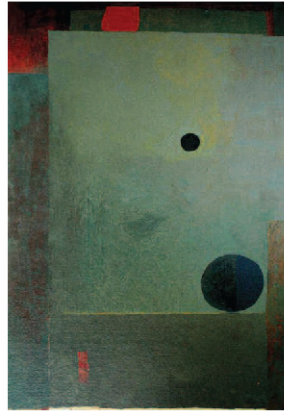


The following story is from the book

The Central Figures
The Báb
Volume Two



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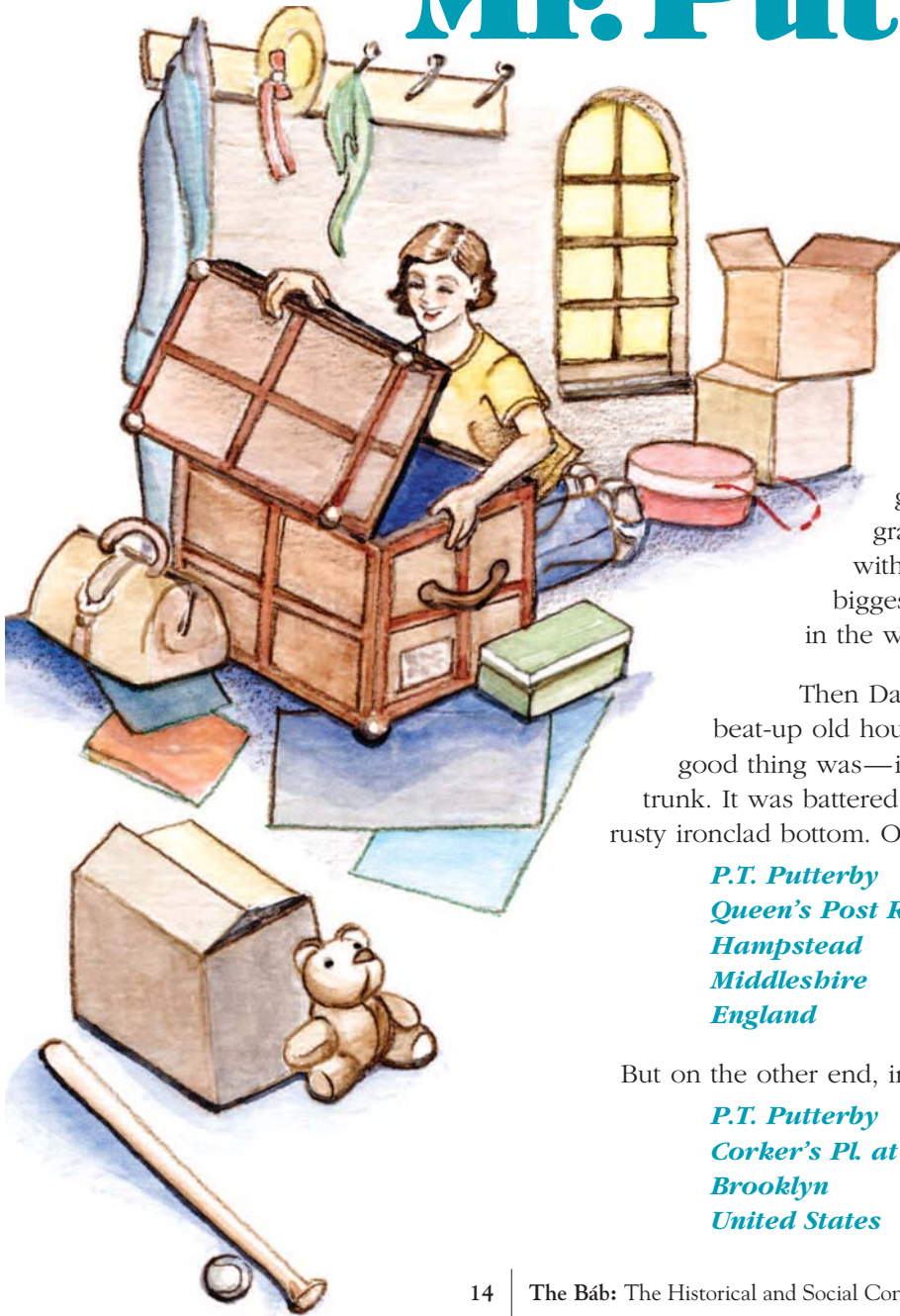
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Core Curriculum for Spiritual Education • Stories
National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States


Bahá'í Publishing Trust
Wilmette, Illinois

Mr. Putterby's Trunk

*Written by Rick Johnson
Illustrated by Nina Scott*



I was always Jake's 'bud,' not his 'kid sister.' He taught me to drum, play goalie, stare down that bully in third grade, and throw an egg fifty yards without smashing it . . . Jake was the biggest adventure in my life. When he died in the war, I lost my best friend.

Then Dad lost his job and we moved to a beat-up old house. My life seemed ruined. The only good thing was—in a dusty nook of the attic, I found a trunk. It was battered, with dry and cracking leather, and a rusty ironclad bottom. One end had this address:

***P.T. Putterby
Queen's Post Road
Hampstead
Middlesbire
England***

But on the other end, in the same careful lettering, was written:

***P.T. Putterby
Corker's Pl. at Newtsbury Ave.
Brooklyn
United States***

Stacks of dusty journals filled the trunk. I glanced at a few, and then began to read them. It turned out to be a real adventure story. Each day, P.T. wrote down what he did. For bored and lonely me—it was great!

When he started writing, P.T. was only two years older than me. I often tried to picture him. Was he fat, with big drooping eyebrows? Or more like my tall and skinny brother? I liked that image best. As I read, it felt like I had an interesting, adventurous friend again. His life was so different from mine. I kept thinking: “This could have been me. How would I have felt?”

About 1835, P.T.’s family settled in San Francisco.¹ P.T.’s father was a grocer by day, but he ran a school for immigrants at night. Most people in those days didn’t learn to read and write—but P.T. did.

At fourteen, P.T. was “shanghaied”² to serve on a ship bound for China. His journals started aboard the *Cathay Clipper* . . .

June 21, 1841: “Reached port in Manila. Thank God! The first land in two months. A peddler I helped gave me this journal book. My first ‘wage’! Ship owners steal men off the street and pay us nothing. It’s hell on earth . . .”

P.T. escaped when his ship reached Canton. He didn’t like what he saw in China:

January 20, 1842: “The Chinese call the British devils. They are not far wrong. China is flooded with opium, and foreign traders make huge profits. Everywhere there are opium-smokers—even children. It sickens me.”

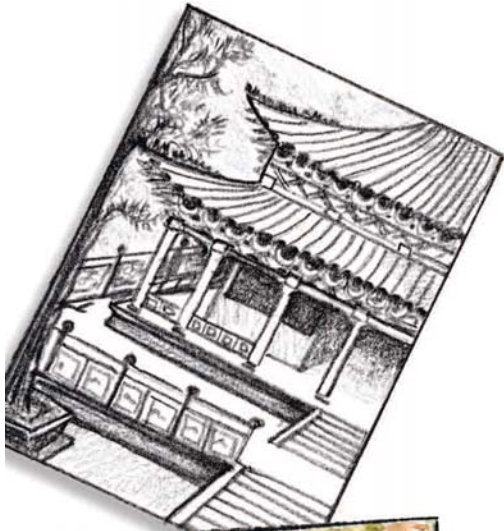
Chinese anger against foreigners made P.T. run for his life:

September 8, 1842: “An angry crowd cursed foreigners tonight: ‘Opium poisons our people! Foreigners are dogs! Money is all they care about. Let

¹ P.T. Putterby is not a real person, but the things that happen in the story are historically accurate.

² It was common practice in the 19th century to force young men into service on sailing ships, especially those bound for China. Force and fraud were used to take men, even to the extent of kidnapping. The practice continued in San Francisco as late as 1915.





us arm and go against them.’ It is very dangerous. I will leave, sailing for India.”

P.T.’s words really hit me. I remember Jake said once that greed and hate were twins.

September 12, 1842: *“As I leave Canton, I see many foreign ships coming into port. Europe seeks ‘open doors’ to more trade in China. The foreign powers want China to ‘open doors’ to trade. This will bring another war.³ The Chinese see their country being killed by opium and foreign greed. They believe the Christian missionaries destroy their ways. This proud country, center of civilized life for a thousand years, will fight. And they will be blown to bits. Dear God, is there not a better way?”*

In Bombay, his feelings for justice boiled out:

November 2, 1842: *“British colonials are no worse than the Germans, Dutch, or others, but the British Empire is everywhere. Here, the British that run India call the poor dirty and immoral—the ‘Great Unwashed.’”*

After that, P.T. got his hand broken defending an Indian laborer being beaten by his British masters. He didn’t write anything for a month.

When P.T. did start to write again, he told the world about the injustice he was seeing. Major newspapers paid him for his stories.

May 1, 1845: *“Today I wrote about industry in Manchester. Workers live apart, packed in tiny rooms. The wealthy never mingle with them. There are no sewers; all waste runs in the streets. The air is foul and smoky.*

But the crowning glory of this industrial paradise is the coal pits. The smallest girls and boys mine coal. They work deep

³ At the height of the opium trade in China, it is estimated that one-half of the population in some areas was addicted. Chinese resisting the opium imports fought the First Opium War, 1840–41. British forces overwhelmed the poorly armed Chinese, at great loss of life.



underground in nearly pitch-blackness. In one pit, I saw 10-year-old children stripped to the waist, sweating like a river! If there is a God Almighty, is there not a better way?"

P.T. saw what desperate people do when times are hard:

February 15, 1848: *"Talk of revolution swirls in Paris coffee shops. A newly published 'Communist Manifesto' calls for workers to rise up and revolt!"*

February 23, 1848: *"Awoke today to shouts in the streets of Paris: 'To arms! To arms! The people are being slaughtered!'" The spectacle was ghastly! Workers against soldiers. Revolt—but spears against cannon? Dear God, is there not a better way?"*

Returning to America in 1849, P.T. landed in Washington, D.C. The brutality in his nation's capital was the last straw:

August 15, 1849: *"A slave auction near the Capitol. Human 'merchandise' bewilders me. What would it feel like to buy a man? No trickery can persuade me that this is not a man, just like me."*

Something changed inside P.T. that day:

August 16, 1849: *"It is not enough to report the sorry old doings of mankind. There must be a systematic search for better ways. A NEWSPAPER TO REPORT SUCH NEWS IS NEEDED!"*

Investing his savings, P.T. began publishing *The World Observer & Scientist*. The newspaper's motto—*Is There Not A Better Way*—was pure P.T. He published articles on scientific discoveries, new religious ideas, and political reform. And true to his beginnings, there was international news.

Before long, P.T. had offices in both Brooklyn and England. Many people read his paper.

⁴ 1848 was a revolutionary year in Europe. Uprisings occurred in Palermo, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Prague, and Milan. Marx and Engels published their famous "Communist Manifesto" in the midst of this revolutionary ferment.





When he glimpsed progress, P.T. was filled with hope:

May 10, 1869: “When I was born in 1827, President Adams⁵ traveled no faster than Julius Caesar. Today, the transcontinental railroad is finished, and this vast continent is crossed in a few days! But what I find most striking is that white men born in America built this railroad; former slaves whose ancestors lived in Africa built it; men from China built it; Indians, Mexicans—men and women from all across the world were part of it. In these faces I see us building a country, too . . . a new kind of country.”⁶

P.T. believed in God, but he didn’t go to church. He hated religions that said it was O.K. for slaves to be sold. Then he stumbled across a ‘camp meeting’⁷ that really got his attention:

March 12, 1853: “Today, I happened to hear a BLACK PREACHER! He was one of those Christians that expected Christ to return in 1844.⁸ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘many of us imagined Jesus would return in 1844, but God is bigger than our imagination! I am not disheartened. God will send the Savior as He wants Him to be, not as man imagines He should be.’ THIS IS THE FIRST SENSIBLE PREACHER I HAVE HEARD!”

Even a new way to think about religion, however, did not settle him into a church:

October 14, 1900: “Until the church is absolutely through with blessing injustice and war, I will not be a member.”

But just before he died in 1917, he met someone who shared the same ideas:

April 30, 1917: “Waiting for Mr. Humboldt at the Hotel Brunswick, I happened to meet Miss Martha Root.⁹ Learning she was a traveler and

⁵ U.S. President John Quincy Adams.

⁶ Transcontinental railroad information adapted from Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nothing Like It In The World*, pp. 265–66, 349, 357.

⁷ A Christian religious service of several days’ length, often with hundreds of people inspired by preaching and singing.

⁸ The Millerite movement attracted hundreds of African-Americans in the 1840s and 1850s, with several prominent black preachers giving the message to mixed-race meetings.

⁹ The Bahá’í National Convention of 1917 was held at this Boston hotel. Martha Root attended. The famous “Little Ben”—a small blue teaching pamphlet—was introduced at this convention. Martha used them often.

writer, I was much interested. She gave me a small blue booklet she says has teachings of a new great Prophet from God. These ideas seem exactly like the ones I hold! World peace, freedom, justice, religious agreement, and unity. Dear God, could this be my better way?"

At the bottom of Mr. Putterby's trunk was an envelope containing the blue book. With it were a letter and a gold coin—exciting!

May 1, 1917

Dear Miss Root,

I forgot to get your address, but Mr. Humboldt has agreed to find it out and forward this. I very much agree with what you told me of your beliefs. It would be my deepest joy if you would accept this small sum to help you with the printing costs on the blue book. When you are next in Brooklyn, I would very much like to hear you speak on these teachings.

**Sincerely yours,
P.T. Putterby**

The envelope never reached Miss Root. I want to track down information about her. Perhaps her organization still exists. I would love to deliver P.T.'s letter. Jake would like that. ★

