

Britain, Slavery and Gothic Fiction

Coram Boy, Extract 1: Toby

Toby said he came from Africa.

'Where is Africa?' Aaron had asked.

'It's far, far away over the dark green ocean,' whispered Toby mysteriously. 'Old Benjamin told me.'

Old Benjamin was a freed slave who worked for Cobbler Jack making shoes for the Coram children, and was so old that his black hair was like silver ash.

'But my mammy is in America,' Toby told Aaron with awe.

'Where is America?' Aaron had asked.

'It's far, far away over another dark green ocean. I told old Benjamin when I grow up I'll go and find her. But he said, "No, Toby, no. They will ship you off to the plantations. They will make you a slave just like your mammy, and put you in irons and brand you like a bull. It's best you stay here and forget her. You can be a free man here." But I said, "I'm not afraid. When I grow up I'll find her. I'll go and get a magic spell to make my skin white so no one will know, and I'll go like a white man and find my mammy."'

Aaron had stayed silent for a long while thinking about these things and then he asked, 'How will you go to America and Africa?'

'On a ship, a big, big ship with lots of sails. I've seen them on the river. Do you remember that time I was a server? I served for Mr Philip Gaddarn when he held that party which went on for three days. We were on barges – twelve barges – full of fine ladies and gentlemen, and there was musicians playing wonderful instruments, and they set off fireworks, and I saw the ships, the huge merchant ships, and I heard the gentlemen talking about them ships. They owned some of them, and they said they went to America and Africa with their masts taller than trees and flapping sails like giant birds.'

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Toby would be dressed like a miniature prince, in silk trousers and embroidered jacket with curling slippers and a bejewelled turban on his head. He would be given a silver platter laden with sweetmeats which he had to hand round to all the guests. The ladies adored him, and loved to bounce him on their knees, feed him sweets, and push their fingers under his turban to feel his extraordinary crinkly hair. There was never a shortage of demand for little Toby.

'In their eyes, I'm nothing but an animal – no different from one of Mr Gaddarn's poodle. I hate being picked up and stroked and cuddled by his fat-fingered women; undressed to see if I'm, black all over or having my skin scraped to see if I am white underneath my black. I am just as easily pinched and kicked if they feel like it. One night the party went on till five o'clock the next morning and I fell asleep. I couldn't help it. I tried and tried to keep awake. Mr Gaddarn had me whipped. I ate it, Aron, I hate it!' he wept, 'And I know that I am soon to be taken on un Mr Gaddarn's household forever.'

Aaron urged Toby to tell the governor how he was being treated. But Toby didn't dare. 'Mr Gaddarn is one of their benefactors,' he cried. 'They'll never believe me. They won't want to believe me.'