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“IT WONT SINK.”

A STORY FOR THE NEW YEAR.

BY M. GUY PEARSE.

SOME years ago, when I was living on the east coast of England, I often used to go to sea for a night's trawling.

My companion on such occasions was a brave fisherman, himself at once the captain and crew of his craft. Though still a young man when he decided to be a soldier and servant of the Lord Jesus, yet his early life had been a somewhat wild one; and his career on board a ship that had regularly been engaged in smuggling had given him many adventures of peril and daring. As for our craft, she was not much to look at: used chiefly for dredging the stones from which the “Roman” cement is prepared, she carried the marks of her hard service; but she had one quality that covered

many defects: she could stand any amount of sea, as my friend had often proved—and I, too, sometimes, in the fierce easterly gales that broke upon that coast. With a fire-place for cooking, and a snug cabin for sleeping in, the roughness of it all rather added to the enjoyment. But it was the company of my fisherman friend that was the special charm of these nights at sea. Simple and God-fearing, a quiet happiness seemed always singing in his soul that often broke out into some glad song of praise as we drifted together in the still evening or flew before a stiff breeze. He was a man, too, who thought much, and had little opportunity of talking, so that I got from him many an opinion about things in general that it was good to hear.

It was as we sat together at daybreak, on a lovely morning in June, that he told me this story. We were drifting quietly along with the trawl overboard; not a sound was there to break the perfect stillness, except only the lapping of the water against the boat. Here and there shone the white sails of

some ship, or floated the long line of smoke from some steamer. Behind us slept the country, with wooded hills and sloping corn-fields, and a house whose windows dazzled in the rays of the rising sun. All above us and about us stretched the wondrous beauty of the sky—the deep blue coming down to the green hills and the red cliffs; overhead there were the rosy hues, long lines of fleecy clouds growing more and more golden as they neared the water’s edge, with straight lines of white light shooting up between them in singular regularity. Right in front of us went a broad sheet of pure gold that led away to the sun as it was coming up out of the sea. A flock of gulls completed the beauty and peacefulness of the scene—the “birds of calm sat brooding on the charmed wave.” Hushed, and almost awed, by the loveliness and sacredness of it all, it seemed to us like a glimpse of some better world, untouched by earth’s defilement, undisturbed by earth’s ado—a world that belonged to God rather than to man.

The deep feelings that were stirred within

us seemed to find their natural outlet as we joined together in singing the morning hymn—

“Awake, my soul, and with the sun
Thy daily stage of duty run;
Shake off dull sloth, and joyful rise
To pay thy morning sacrifice.

Wake, and lift up thyself, my heart,
And with the angels bear thy part,
Who all night long unwearied sing
High praise to the eternal King.”

Our singing had ceased and all was still again. Presently my friend began—“Ah, sir, this is very different from what it used to be in the old time. We never used to think much about the beauty of the sea or the sky when day broke—nor about God either. We should get out the telescope, and sweep the sea all round to find if the government cutter was in sight, and only wished the darkness had lasted an hour or two longer, that we might have got our cargo ashore.

“I can remember once”—and he laughed

as he spoke—“ though there—it was no laughing matter then, at any rate for us. There was one morning when we caught sight of her—far off, almost, as you could see, but for all that we knew her rig in a minute, and terribly put about we were too—for we had a full cargo aboard. At first we hoped that she wasn’t after us—or tried to, anyhow. But very soon all hope was gone. She was bearing down upon us, sir, as straight as a line.

“Of course we knew that we could never get away from her, do what we might. We looked at each other, for every man knew well enough that if we were caught it meant prison for us—and it meant the loss of the cargo, and ship too—sawn in two, right across: that was her punishment, sir, in those times. We were still enough for a minute or so, all of us waiting for the captain to speak, and there all the time that speck of a sail coming straight for us. It was plain enough what she was bound for, and gaining upon us, too.

“Presently he spoke out, ‘Well, lads,

there's no help for it that I can see, but this—let them come and find a clear hold and an empty ship. They may make of it what they can then. A man can't swing for that, anyhow.'

"Well, sir, at it we went. We put a sail over the side of the ship for a blind, and then to work. It was tobacco, done up in canvas bags, made handy for the sake of easy carrying. Half of us went down in the hold, and flung up the bags as fast as ever we could; and the rest were slipping them over the side of the ship, under the sail and into the sea. Eh, how we worked! 'Heave away, lads,' the captain kept saying; 'as well not do it at all as leave a bag behind—a single one will show them the game we've been up to.'

"Bit by bit we were stripped to the waist, and steaming with the heat of it, from captain to cabin-boy. Pity enough it seemed to be, flinging the stuff over like that; but it was too late to think about that now. 'At it, my hearties!' says the captain. 'It will be something to laugh at to see the officer come

aboard, and set his chaps to search the ship, and find an empty hold. Heave away, my lads.’

“We laughed at the captain’s joke, and worked all the fiercer for his bit of fun. Of course the hold began to show the difference in the cargo, working as we were. But we were beginning to get a bit fagged and spent.

“‘Fling away, lads,’ the captain kept saying, himself doing the work of two men. ‘They will spoil our laughing if they find any thing left.’

“And then again it was still except for the splashing of the bags in the sea.

“We were beginning to think that we should do it.

“‘A quarter of an hour more, and ’tis clear,’ cried the captain, joyfully; and every man felt as if he could breathe again. We were going it for our lives, and never an eye or an ear for any thing else. Presently the captain sees that the boy was getting a bit done up, and he tells him to run out and look how the cutter was coming along. He was gone for a

second, and then he come back, and you wouldn't have known him. We all stopped to look at him—we couldn't help it. His face was as white as death; and there he stood, with his eyes staring as if they would drop out of his head. His mouth was wide open, but he couldn't say a word, and his hands were stretched out before him. The captain began swearing at him, and asked him what he meant. But the lad, he couldn't utter a sound. He was more like a boy out of his senses than any thing else. Then the captain jumps up and grips his arm and shakes him. The poor little fellow managed to gasp out—"It wont sink!" and he fell down in a faint.

"'It wont sink!'" We guessed in a moment what he meant. We hurried away to the stern of the ship, but nobody expected to see any thing like the sight that was waiting for us there—a sight, sir, to fetch a man's heart out of him. It was a beautiful morning, like this. And there, right away in the glistening track of the sun, was the cargo. You could see the line of the canvas bags, rising with the bit

of swell, and shining in the light, one after the other reaching away to the cutter herself; there they were, every one of them proclaiming our guilt to all the heaven above us, and to every ship that was up and down the coast. Our hands just went down, sir, and there we sat, every man of us still as death, with his eyes set on that dreadful line of evidence against us, and every man with those words ringing in his soul—‘It won’t sink!’”

My friend was silent for a minute or two, and I thought the story was finished, at any rate so far as he cared to tell it. I had turned to enjoy the delicious stillness and the exquisite beauty of the scene, when he began again, but in another tone—

“Well, sir, it did not end there. I little thought at the time what would come out of that empty hold; and least of all that it could ever be any good. Of course I often used to think a bit seriously about things, and meant to mend; but somehow it never came to any thing. Still, my dear old mother kept pray-

ing on for me, and in spite of every thing she would always hold to it that I should come right some day. 'Prayer is not much good if it isn't stronger than the devil and sin,' she would say, even when father and the rest of them had given me up. It was somewhere about two or three years after the adventure with the cutter that, one night—the last night of the year, it was—I had gone down the river in my boat, thinking I might get some wild fowl, for there were a good many in the river. It was a dull, misty night when I started. I got down some distance, and then pushed away in under the bank, waiting for the moon to get up. It was all as still and quiet as could be, with never a sound but now and then the cry of a curlew, or the wings of the wild ducks overhead. The moon was getting up behind the hill, and the trees were standing all black against the light, and the silver shining between their trunks and branches. From ever so far off there came the sound of a peal of bells, ringing the old year out.

“‘The last night of the year,’ I said to

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myself. Of course I couldn't help feeling a bit sad at the words, though I can hardly tell why. But as I sat there in the stillness, it began to come to my mind how I used to kneel down at my mother's side while she taught me to pray. I could hear her voice quite plain telling me of one good man and another, and of what they had done to make the world better. And I felt her hand laid upon my head again, and could see her sitting by the fire with her eyes closed and her lips moving, and I knew she was praying God to bless me.

“I sighed as I thought of it all, and said half aloud, ‘If I died to-night, there isn't a soul in the world that would thank God that I had ever lived.’ I began to feel as if out of joint with every thing. The more I thought of it the plainer I saw that my whole life was a failure. God had made me for himself, and here I was living as if there was no God, and no eternity. There would be a terrible account to settle some day. And here, another year was almost gone!

"I did not think myself any very great sinner—not then—for I never got drunk, nor went into bad ways like other fellows did. As for smuggling, it never occurred to me that there was any harm in that, except for the company it brought me into. It was the emptiness and uselessness of my life that kept troubling me. The moon was rising higher, and the light fell on the flat stretch of shore opposite to me; gleaming in the pools here and there, and in the little curves and hollows that the tide had left. And somehow it came to be a picture of my life—it lay ugly and useless like the mud, no good, you couldn't grow anything in it, couldn't even walk on it or build on it; there was no foundation for any thing. 'A life like that mudbank!' I said to myself, with a shudder. My sad thoughts went slowly sinking down within me, until now the moon rode clear and full in the sky, lighting up all the woods opposite to me, and seeming to make it stiller than ever. Then out upon the silence came the pealing of the bells. Should the new year be no better than the rest?—

only another stretch of mud, foul and ugly and useless?

“I bowed my head on the side of the boat, and prayed God to help me. By his grace, from that night I would be another man. I would just give up any thing, every thing I could think of that hindered my being a good man. Though I did not get drunk, I made up my mind to have done with the drink; never would I cross the threshold of the public-house again.”

My friend laughed as he came to this part of his story. “I signed the pledge, sir, but it was in a new fashion, too—perhaps never a temperance pledge was signed that way before. I was sitting there in the mist and shadow of that side of the river, and there came a flock of ducks right down within easy shot. I was thinking about the pledge, and never saw them till they were right on to me. Then I put my gun to the shoulder, and in a minute more I should have had a brace, but that very second it came into my mind that the public-house where I met my mates was called The

Wild Drake. 'You shall go,' I cried out, half laughing as I said it—'go for a token that, by God's help, I have done with The Wild Drake for ever and ever.' Well, I knew I should make short work of the old company, and of the old ways, too, as soon as I had done with the drink. Then I thought of one thing and another. I would go with mother on Sundays, and a half-a-dozen other things came to my mind that I would have done with. My heart began to beat with a kind of a pride. It was grand to be getting into a good man all so quickly, and so easy, too. Why, if I went on like this I should get into a saint! The cry of the ducks overhead and the whistle of the curlews were nothing to me now. Was there any thing else that I could do? For I was going to make a clean sweep. It was no use playing at it. Half and half would only mean the old ways back again very soon. If I was going to turn over a new leaf, it must be all as smooth and white and clean as it could be. My resolution seemed to grow with every new

surrender, and all my heart was lighter and gladder for every thing that I gave up. My whole life should be changed, and this new year should have a brighter tale to tell than any that I had ever lived before. Then I thought I would push off the boat and get away home, and tell the dear old mother what I meant to do.

“Ah, sir, I can never forget it. I had pushed off and turned round homeward, and just settled to the oars, feeling as if every thing was right—wind and tide and all was fair. There, right in front of me, was the glistening water, stretching like a sheet of silver away toward the moon. In an instant it all flashed back upon me as plain as I ever saw any thing in my life. I could see the cabin-boy with his pale face and his hands stretched out, and I seemed to hear his cry again—‘It wont sink!’ I had been clearing the hold, pitching the cargo into the sea, but there it was; right away behind me, like as if it stretched up to the very throne of God, there was every word that I had ever spoken, every

thing I had ever done, every wish I had ever felt—there it lay, right out in the light of God. My soul sank down in helplessness and horror. "It wont sink!" were the words that kept ringing over and over again in my ears.

"I just flung myself at the oars with a desperate fierceness. It was no good my trying—not a bit. It did not matter what I did; there seemed nothing else for it but to give right in to every thing that was bad. Whatever I did, wherever I went, there was all the past stretching out before God—nothing forgotten! nothing buried! It was no use playing the fool like this any longer—clearing the hold when the cargo wouldn't sink. Tears filled my eyes, partly because all my hopes were gone, and partly because I was so helpless to make things any better. I just pulled away fierce, and almost mad, wishing with every stroke of the oars that I could get down under the water and end it all.

"Every thing seemed to mock me. The great moon shone all so still and bright, as if it were nothing at all that any body should be

tossed and driven away like my soul was. The mud itself, the ugly, useless mud, shone all silvery in the light, as if somehow it was possible for every thing to be better except me. So on in that stillness I went, feeling the wretchedest soul that ever lived, just as if I was dragging that dreadful past after me with every stroke of the oars. The ringing of the bells came across the water again, but there was no music in it for me. What was the good of ringing out the old year and ringing in the new, when, year in and year out, there was all my life lying out like that before God! I couldn't undo a thing of it, couldn't unsay a word! It seemed a mockery to ring bells in a world like this.

“But as I pulled on the fierceness died out of me, until all that I felt was a great burden of helplessness. My hold of the oars grew slacker and slacker, until I stopped pulling altogether, and just drifted with the tide. Tears filled my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. I looked right away up into the heavens—there was only a star or two shining,

but somehow it made me feel that God was looking down on me, and surely, I thought, he must pity me. Could I not kneel down and tell him all about it, and ask him to help me? And my mother's saying came to my mind—that 'prayer is stronger than the devil and sin.' I pulled into a bit of 'hard' where I could land, and made my boat fast. Then I went away to a bit of rocky cliff by the riverside, underneath an old tree. I kneeled down and began to pray. I just pleaded guilty to it all. 'There it lies, Lord, floating out under thine eye, all the past,' I cried in my distress. I told him that I did want to start afresh, but that it was no use if I had always to go dragging the past after me like this. I did not like to ask the Lord to sink it all, but I did ask him what he could do with it. The more I prayed the more sure I felt that he would help me. I had forgotten all about the time, and just kneeled on in prayer. How long I had been there I can't tell, perhaps for an hour or more. Then all in a moment, I don't know how, but I could sooner

doubt my own life than doubt this. It was like a blaze of light on my mind—every thing was as clear as day. The Lord Jesus Christ had come on purpose to deliver me from that past. It was gone—all gone. It was all cut off and sunk. I looked, and it was as if I could see across the shining water, and there was not a speck upon it, not one black sin left floating there. My sins were buried in the depths of the sea. I shouted for joy. No poor condemned prisoner ever felt so glad at his escape as I did that night. The past was *sunk*—no eye could see it; none could ever find it again; it was gone, to be remembered against me no more for ever. Turn where I would it was sunshine and calm. There was no condemnation. Once again I looked up, with my eyes filled with tears, but they were tears of joy this time.

“As I pushed off and began to row homeward there came again the pealing of the bells. Ah, there was music in it now, music that my own soul answered to, for all the joy-bells of my heart were ringing their very sweetest.

"So that is what came out of that summer morning's adventure. And that is how I began the new year, thank God, and how I began a new life, too. I have very often thought of it since, and said to myself—'It is no good clearing the hold if the cargo wont sink.' "

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