

“The Ship and the Life.”

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“The Ship and the Life.”

“And now I exhort you to be of good cheer; for there shall be no loss of any man’s life among you, but of the ship.”—Acts xxvii: 22.

What a strange estimate of values that was, that one man should be held worth so much more than the whole ship; for the ship, it appears, was to be lost; but the promise is that the man shall be saved; therefore “be of good cheer.” That was the speaker’s estimate; did all his hearers accept the same estimate, I wonder?

It was a great corn ship bound for Rome; ship of a thousand tons burden, very likely, and bearing a precious cargo of wheat for that hungry population. As they were sailing along the southern shore of Crete, a fierce storm had fallen upon them; and under its violence they had now been drifting westward for many days, the great ship leaking worse and worse, till hope of escape was nearly gone. Besides the cargo of wheat the ship carried men, some two hundred and seventy-six of them, different sorts of men; the owner himself was on board, the master, and the sailors, a centurion and company of soldiers; and besides these some prisoners bound for Rome.

It was one of these prisoners who spoke the words that I have taken for a text; and I am wondering how far his estimate of values commended itself to his various fellow-voyagers. “Sirs, I exhort you to be of good cheer; for there shall be no loss of any man’s life among you, but of the ship.” In other words, the ship and all the precious cargo in it were not to be compared in value with one human life.

That was how this prisoner Paul viewed the matter; for if it had been the other way, if it had been a man’s life that was to be lost and the ship saved, that had been another story;—one man’s life lost, and the ship saved; one poor fellow slipping overboard, struggling in the waves, crying pitifully for help, drifting astern, gone. If Paul had been looking on at such a spectacle you would not have heard him saying, “Be of good cheer, sirs, for only a life is lost, and

the ship is safe." Why, no ; I think we should have seen him rather rushing to the rail gazing after the poor wretch, throwing out to him anything he could lay his hands on that might keep him afloat ; and shouting to the pilot to come about and lower the boat ; himself jumping into the sea, if he knew how to swim ; anything to save that one imperiled life. And if all failed, and if now all hope of saving him had gone, if the man had sunk finally out of sight, then the rest of the day would have been darkened, I think, for this Christian Paul. But when it was only the ship that was to be lost, while every soul on her would be saved ;—that kind of loss would not trouble his appetite much, or his sleep either. "Be of good cheer, sirs," he cries. Now I say, I wonder how far Paul's fellow-voyagers agreed with this view of the subject. The owner of the ship, for instance. This would be strange doctrine for him. "Good cheer, sir, not a soul lost, only the ship." "Only the ship, but that is all I have in the world. To lose my ship will leave me beggared ; and all this precious cargo of wheat that was to make my everlasting fortune in hungry Rome—all of it sunk ; and the fool tells me to be of good cheer because a lot of good-for-nothing sailors and prisoners get safe ashore. Every soul of them might go to the bottom, and welcome, if only I could save my ship." I strongly suspect that was the owner's view of the matter. Paul's doctrine would be strange doctrine to him.

And the sailors—well we know how they felt about it. For they tried to make off in the night in the lifeboat, and leave ship, and owner, and soldiers, and prisoners, and every other soul on board to go to the bottom together. That was the doctrine of this particular crew of sailors—they cared not much for men's lives, unless it happened to be their own.

And the soldiers ? Well, we know that when the ship was beached a few hours later, and began to break up in the surf, the soldiers proposed killing all the prisoners lest some of them escape. According to the soldiers' doctrine a man, as such, was worth very little. It would have seemed to those soldiers the height of absurdity to suggest that one friendless prisoner might be worth more than the whole ship. I doubt whether Paul would have found many subscribers to his novel creed in that ship's company.

Suppose some pleasant day with fair wind blowing, everything drawing, ship holding her course, some luckless passenger had slip-

ped and gone over, and a big shark following in the wake had snapped him up—why, those soldiers would hardly have stopped the throwing of their dice long enough to look over and see what became of him. The man at the helm gives one quick glance astern when he hears the splash and then turns his eyes forward again to the sail. “Only a worthless prisoner gone. The ship is safe, thank Jove. One life does not count.” But to lose the ship and her cargo, and all their own personal effects; to be spilled into the surf, and washed up half drowned on the beach, and pulled ashore by a lot of barbarians; and spend the winter storm-bound on a little island. What sort of a prospect was that? I doubt whether there was another soul on board—unless two or three of Paul’s fellow-Christians—who felt and believed, as he felt and believed, that the humblest human life was worth more than the biggest ship and the richest cargo.

That would have been strange doctrine anywhere in that First Century, afloat or ashore. Human life was cheap in those days. An army would march over the enemy’s country and massacre the whole population, if it served their purpose. One baby more or less did not count for much in their estimate of values. Or if it served their purpose better, they would sell the whole population into slavery for so much gold.

It seemed quite right to a Roman of those days that a troop of prisoners, or of gladiators, should be set hacking each other to pieces in the arena, to amuse the crowd on a holiday. It was a cheap show, fit for a public holiday. So this was strange doctrine then anywhere afloat or ashore, to say that human life was the one most precious commodity in the world, the one priceless commodity—any human life, every human life, “Jew or Greek, male or female, barbarian, Scythian, bond or free,”—that every such life was worthy of a king’s ransom. Strange doctrine, in that First Century of the Christian Era; but it was the Christian doctrine; and Paul, since he became a Christian, had been mastering that doctrine, and now this was the doctrine that he was always announcing and commending to his neighbors;—as when once he said: “Destroy not by thy meat him for whom Christ died”; or here in the storm when he cries: “Good cheer, the big ship is doomed, but every life shall be saved.”

This Christian doctrine concerning the value of human life was not mastered at once even by all who called themselves Christians. In later days armies of soldiers marching under the cross have some-

times behaved themselves as unchristianly as any of the old legions of Rome. Not many generations ago in Christian England herself I seem to have read how a mother might be hanged who had snatched a loaf of bread for her starving child. "O God, that bread should be so dear, and flesh and blood so cheap." In the past I think it must be confessed that much of our legislation, even in Christendom, has been shaped with reference to the saving of the ship, irrespective of what becomes of the human lives.

Indeed, is your own conscience quite easy as to your own personal attitude toward this question in some of its applications? Put yourself in the place of the owner of Paul's ship; could you have cheerfully let the craft go to the bottom rather than sacrifice the life of one of the prisoners. Or even put yourself in the place of one of the passengers on that ship—could you have cheerfully let the craft go to the bottom, carrying all your baggage with it, breaking up your own plans for the year, imprisoning you for a dreary winter on a wretched island, rather than sacrifice the life of one poor prisoner or sailor.

Or suppose the ship were a railroad company or manufactory, and you a stockholder in it, which do you care most about, the size of your own dividends, or the life of some brakeman coupling a train of freight cars; or the effect of the factory work on the lives of the men and women at work in it. The world has been slow in mastering this great Christian doctrine which Paul proclaimed nineteen hundred years ago so clearly that it could be heard above the roar of the storm concerning the relative value of ships and of men, of human property and human lives. We confess that we have not mastered it yet.

No; but at least we do begin to recognize it as the doctrine that will have to be mastered. We do begin to grow uneasy and ashamed at our stupidity over this great lesson; and that it is something to be thankful for. If we are far from knowing the lesson yet, we begin at least to suspect that neither the tendencies of society about us, nor the consciences that God has put within us, will ever leave us at peace until that great lesson has been learned. I refuse to speak on this subject to-day in the tones of a pessimist. However the old darkness still surrounds and covers us, yet the world is looking toward the light, and moving toward the light. For we do begin to feel the dignity and sacredness of men over ships; of human lives over material

things. Civilized society can no longer tolerate the selling of men or women for gold. A Roman Senator could calmly pay his admission and go in with entire self-respect to watch men kill each other in the arena for the public amusement ;—a Roman Senator could ; a United States Senator could not. Whether or not the instruction comes from men who call themselves Christians—it may come from men who repudiate that title ; it may come from labor organizations, it may come from some radical leader of social discontent ; but the instruction is coming, and in such a way that we cannot close our ears to it, that man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things that he possesseth, but rather in certain qualities inherent in the man himself ; in other words, that the vital interests of this world always claim precedence over any kind of property interests ; that "the value of property itself, as many are now insisting, must be reckoned in terms of the human industry and human devotion that have gone into it, and then of the vital human betterment that may be got out of it ;"—this last is a free quotation from Karl Marx, but, wherever it comes from, it is good Christian doctrine ;—in short, that living men belong on a plane of worth altogether above that of dead things ; that the value of the ship is not to be named in the same breath with that of the lives. That is the great Christian principle—Paul's principle, which he had learned from Jesus Christ. And though few have mastered the principle yet, though many have barely made a start at acquiescing in it, yet the whole world begins to suspect that the principle is sound, and that some day it will have to be written large into all the laws of nations and all the creeds and customs of men.

I am determined this morning to speak on this entire subject hopefully. I am glad to adopt the very phrase of the apostle and cry, "Sirs, be of good cheer." The signs about us are so many that the day is breaking, the day of man's enfranchisement. Have you ever interested yourself at all in the wide-spread agitation against child labor, for instance, or any of the other reforms of the hour which are aimed against the tyranny of property interest over human interests ? The world's property, it is true, goes on swelling ; we have bigger ships to-day than any Roman sailor ever dreamed of. But we begin to see that all this property ought to be made to keep its place. Let me recall a single incident reported in our newspapers—perhaps a year ago—how a great liner was crossing the Atlantic, her cabins full of passengers, all impatient to see the end of their

journey. How she carried mail on the prompt delivery of which depended the business interests of two continents. But one day in mid-ocean it became known that far down in the hold of this ship one poor stoker had been stricken with a disease of which some of us know the terror ; and that nothing could save him but an immediate operation ; and that the surgeon reported that it was impossible for him to attempt the task while the vessel was quivering under the blows of the great engine that was driving her through the waves ; and how by the command of the captain, and with the cheerful acquiescence of very soul on board, that great engine stopped ; and the swift liner stood still in mid-ocean, and the commercial interests of two continents might wait for one full hour, while skilful brain and fingers were utilizing the latest attainments of surgical science to save the life of that one nameless shoveler of coal. Oh, if Paul had sailed as passenger on that ship, nobody need urge him to be of good cheer ; you could not suppress his exultation, for he would see his own great doctrine getting itself established at last, that the man's life counts for more than the ship.

We come together in this place to-day to thank God for another and still more significant token of the triumph of the same great Christian principle. Eighty years ago there was organized in this city a society of men deeply interested in the shipping of the world. There had been other societies already in existence that were interested in the shipping of the world, and in various ways, whether as builders, or owners, or insurers, or as exporters or importers of goods ; —useful societies, many of them, essential in their way ; but all these had been apt to concern themselves mostly with the value of the ship, or else with the value of the material cargo of the ship. The society organized here eighty years ago proposed to concern itself more especially with the value of the lives. In its view the men who manned the ship constituted the one highest interest. This society came into being under the constraint of Paul's doctrine that, when all is said, it remains true that the highest interest of the ship is not the ship itself, but rather the life ; the living man in the ship. That view of the subject had been generally overlooked. There had been ways of insuring the ship or its cargo, but for a long time no one seemed to have thought to inquire how they should insure the shipmen. Here was an organization which would make that its one aim, for eighty years ago, in the year 1828, was organized a body which named

itself the "AMERICAN SEAMEN'S FRIEND SOCIETY," friend of the men of the sea.

I ought to say, however, that that date and that organization do not mark quite the earliest beginnings of the movement which we celebrate. Let me read you a sentence or two from certain reports of the Society itself which have been kindly put into my hands. "In the summer of 1816," (twelve years earlier than 1828) "some of the members of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City (the Rev. Gardiner Spring's) were in the habit of holding prayer meetings in the lower part of the city in the hope of benefiting such classes of the population as did not frequent public worship. Some of these meetings in Water Street were attended by a few sailors and by other persons connected with the shipping. This suggested the idea of appointing a specific meeting for seamen; and the first one of the kind was held in a house then standing at the corner of Front Street and Old Slip. The meeting was successful and was followed by others of a similar character which awakened a considerable interest, and led to a participation therein by Christians of other churches and denominations."

That was in 1816. Two years later, in 1818, the movement resulted in the formation of the New York Port Society, which still carries on its beneficent work. Ten years later, in further development of the same movement, was formed the AMERICAN SEAMEN'S FRIEND SOCIETY. The Brick Church esteems it an honor to have had even thus much to do with the first starting of the movement; and counts it a privilege to participate in the present anniversary.

I must not detain you at this time for any rehearsal of the details of later history; how the work of the Society has gone on extending till its blessed influences are felt around the world. But even with the hastiest glance over the record of the eighty years one's eye is caught by very significant items:

1850.—"Beginning of Sailors' Home in New York City."

"Agent appointed to visit the lakes."

1831.—"Origin of the New Orleans work."

1832.—"First chaplain sent to Sandwich Islands, also to Havre, France."

1835.—"Rev. O. M. Johnson dispatched to Brazil."

1837.—"Work begun in Cronstadt, Russia, Calcutta, Singapore."

I will simply read some of the names of places to which from time

to time the Society extended her blessed influence : Cape of Good Hope, Cadiz, Australia, Gottenburg and Stockholm, Amsterdam, Canton, Chile, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Callao, Antwerp, Shanghai, Portland, Ore., Copenhagen, Hamburg. And that is only the beginning of the list.

There is one item that I notice for the year 1893 : " Library No. 10,000 sent to sea."

One quickly catches the trend of such a history. Here at last was an institution, destined to be of world-wide influence, and concerned with the shipping of the world, but whose foremost interest was to be not in the dead ship or cargo, but in the living shipmen ; not the thing, but the man ; that by all means, and at all cost, the man should be saved, body and soul, for time and for eternity. Let them save the ship too, if they can, it is worth saving, when you think what service it can render humanity ;—but most of all save the man. That, I take it, is the motto of the AMERICAN SEAMEN'S FRIEND SOCIETY. And so as Christians we may well come together to-day, all of us, whether or not we have been closely identified with this particular Society, to celebrate its organization, and to thank God for its many years of honorable history. It stands as one more most encouraging token of the world-wide progress of this great Christian reform, the coming triumph of the great Christian principle, that " the life is more than meat, and the body than raiment " ; that the man is worth more than all the things that he can own ; that whatever becomes of the ship the one great business of Christian society is to make sure that we save the lives. That is the meaning of our celebration to-day. Because of what has been we thank God and take courage ; and we pray God that the good work may go on.