

COURAGE AND COWARDICE.

A merry group of boys played in the sun by the quay wall one Saturday afternoon, filling the air with merry shouts and laughter, that seemed to make even an old man like me young again as I heard. I took my seat on a grey stone bench by the water side, and sat watching, now the happy boys, and now the deep tide that flowed fast to sea below my feet. Here in sunshine, there in shadow, the constant water flowed,—here slipping smoothly by the sea-wall, there fretting against the prow of barge or ship it ran; and as I watched it, I thought of my own past life, with its lights and glooms, calms and frets, slipping on fast to the eternity beyond; and looking out beyond the harbour's mouth, I could see the great ocean lie in sunlight, and prayed that my eternity might be bright as that.

Perhaps I looked a quaint old body as I sat musing and this may have provoked the boys to play me a trick. One of them passing me knocked my hat off with a stick. Luckily I had not a wig, like John Gilpin, or that would have gone too. It would have gone into the water, as no doubt he had intended, had not one of the boys caught it. The others laughed, and the mischief doer muttered something about an "accident," while my young friend handed it to me politely.

"What a lad he is!" I could hear my disturber say as he ran off; but the lad did not look disturbed by the compliment.

I was roused again presently from my musing by a shout from the boys.

"It's over!" And looking around, I saw my friend, standing capless.

"Brice threw your cap over on purpose."

"Fight him Wilson."

"Yes, give it him, Wilson." We'll see fair play," said the boys eagerly. Brice squared, and stood ready in due fighting position.

"I will not fight," said my friend Wilson. "I am sorry you threw the cap over, Brice, for it was all but new; and I don't see the fun in mischief of that sort. No,—I am not going to fight you."

"Come on, if you dare," said Brice with irritating look and gesture; and all the boys gathered round Wilson, and urged him to "go on," and "give it him."

"I don't like fighting, and I will not fight," said the boy.

A moment before the boys had been ready to make a hero of Wilson; but now their mood changed, so fickle a thing is popular applause, and two or three cried, "Coward!" "He daren't!"

"I am no coward; and I dare do anything that is right," he said, while his crimsoning face showed how he felt the taunt.

"Coward! Never mind him, Brice: he's nothing but a milksop. He'll come here in a new cap to-morrow, and let you kick it round the quay for an appetite, if you're inclined," said one.

"It is not cowardly to be afraid to do wrong. I won't fight for the sake of a cap." And Wilson, as he spoke, thought of the minister's exhortations last Sunday. "We have a great Example to follow, you know," he added, "and it's our duty to follow it. No—I am not going to name that Great Name for you to laugh at, Brice. I

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must do what I think right; and if you all call me cowards, I cannot help it."

A chorus of laughter greeted Wilson's speech, in which Brice's voice was loudest.

"Go home; we don't want a coward's company."

"Go home, coward!" And Wilson turned away.

He had not gone twenty yards when he turned, as did I, at the sound of a heavy splash.

"He's in!"

"He'll drown!—he can't swim!"

"Brice is drowning!" cried the boys at the edge; and some ran for help, others began to throw their clothes off, as if to jump after, but seemed to look at the deep water running ten feet below, fast as a mill-stream, and lose courage, and none would venture. There was any amount of noise and shouting; and one threw a rope over, that fell far short of the drifting boy.

"I'll try," said a voice near me; and Wilson threw his jacket on the ground, ran a stone's throw along the sea wall,

and plunged in gallantly, head foremost.

"He'll save him!"

"He won't—he's not much of a swimmer."

"They'll both go!"

Wilson had outrun the tide before he sprang over, and the next instant he had stopped Brice, catching him by his hair.

"Run and throw him the rope!" I said, and was obeyed; but the rope fell short, and they drifted on.

"The coal-barge!—strike out for it, Wilson," shouted many voices.

"He sees it!—he's doing it!"

"Let him go, Wilson!—save yourself!"

But Wilson was not the boy to let go. He had now caught Brice's jacket, and was striking out with all his remaining strength for the barge. Would he reach it? Would the boat put off from the ship reach him in time? Slowly and painfully he swam partly across the tide. I shut my eyes—I could not watch him. I held my breath to hear the word of life or death

"They're safe!" I heard at last, and looking up, I saw Wilson holding on with one hand to the stern of the coal-barge, and keeping up Brice's head with the other. Next moment the boat reached them.

"Boys!" I said, when Wilson had walked quietly home; for he went quickly, more to shun our praise, I am sure, than to change his dripping clothes.—"Boys! try and don't mistake a hero for a coward next time. Believe an old man when he tells you the truth, that he who fears his Maker fears no man—no danger—not death itself!"

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