

A STORY
ABOUT
FISH AND FISHERS;
FOR
SCHOOL CHILDREN AND THEIR TEACHERS.



LONDON :
THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY ;
SOLD AT
THE DEPOSITORY, 56, PATERNOSTER ROW,
AND 65, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD ;
AND BY THE BOOKSELLERS.

[375.]



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A STORY ABOUT FISH AND FISHERS.

I KNEW a gray-headed man who was fond of parables. I mean that he liked to teach people, and most of all to teach children, by telling them of other things, somewhat like those true and great things which he wished to fix within their minds and hearts.

One day, I heard him tell a story to the children of a school, which as it seemed to please them, I noted down, enlarging it also a little for

them, and for you. He said, " When I was in Palestine, I dreamed that I walked among the mountains, by a shallow winding river, which ran in a rocky channel ; in which were a great many little fish, of a sort unknown to me. They were not perch, nor dace, nor gudgeons, nor minnows, nor trout, but had somewhat of the bright colours of each kind, with brighter eyes than either. Now this river and its banks were pleasant, but not safe ; for besides those little fish, there lay in the stream, or among the weeds, or under the low shrubs that dipped into the water, some fish of prey ; not unlike the pike found in English streams, sometimes called

jack, though I know not why that nick-name was given them. For they, or the elder of their race, lived ages before the noted robber so called,* and thus could not gain a name from him. But robbers they were, robbers of life instead of money; for they killed, by swallowing whole, every poor little fish they could seize.

“ There were, moreover, enemies and dangers beside the stream, as much to be feared as those within it; for I saw several young Arabs, with rod and line, lurking behind the olive trees and flowering bushes on the river's brink. They had baited their hooks with a living worm or fly;

* Sixteen-string Jack.

hardened, or heedless as to the torture, either of these, or of the fish to be caught. Thus, they often hooked a little shining swimmer, not wise enough to resist the lure, and threw him carelessly on the grass to die. Some, however, escaped these foes; yet only to suffer in another form; for I saw in my dream, that the swift river, after a short course, opened at last into a gloomy lake; which one might have taken for the 'dead sea.' Its waters seemed heavy with salt, and stained with sulphur; and I heard no singing birds upon its shores. Towards this dark lake, on which a thick mist was brooding, the shining fish were carried by the force of the

stream. But in its briny and sulphurous waters they could scarcely be said to live. They floated heavily and painfully, longing for the sun, which was quite hidden, and gasping for the air, which was yet too impure and hurtful to breathe; in short, their life there, while it lasted, seemed but a sort of living death. I pitied these poor fish in all their hazards and sufferings, till I was full of sadness in my dream, and almost wept at their lot.

“ But, as I walked back slowly from the lake, along the river side, I observed several persons, some gray-headed, like myself, and more quite youthful, who after holding a

sort of council under a spreading date tree, scattered themselves, and stole along the brink, each with a hand-net. Their dresses and their nets were of plain dark green, so that the fish might almost mistake them for willow trees drooping into the water. Several of these had nets of smaller meshes, in order to catch the very little fish, which no angler, in former times, would have thought of taking. As soon as any net had one or more pair of bright eyes and fins in it, the fisher hastened, with a smile and a light step, carrying his little load over the hillocks skirting the river. I followed and saw each one carefully launching his prizes into a clear smooth pond;

the shallow edges of which were full of water-cresses, and water-lilies. It was fed by a gentle cascade, at the upper end. Now, I saw in my dream, that each of these fishers, even the youngest, had a wallet, stored with bread; and whilst some returned with their nets towards the river, it seemed settled that others should supply food to the fish in their new dwelling. Those little shining folks, though rather shy at first, soon found that the crumbs were sweet and wholesome, and furthermore had no hooks in them. I was much pleased with walking round this pond, seeing the smallest fish glide safely among the lilies; and still more to witness

their gatherings at certain hours, when all, without fear, came close to the brink to be fed. After a time, I found that these fish, though small, had, like the salmon in our British rivers, the power and habit of leaping; and as in these clear and healthful waters they grew strong and able, I watched them, with pleasure, leaping up the little cascade into a broader, deeper pond above; and thus I traced them up a chain of pleasant pools, in each of which they tarried awhile, still kindly supplied with the same good and pleasant food. From the last and largest of these pools, a clear swift stream, after passing roughly between dark rocks, carried them out

into a beautiful lake or inland sea, where corals appeared under the waves, and the shores were bordered by evergreen hills and woods.

“ I saw too, in my dream, that when each had once passed that rough dark rocky outlet, even the least and weakest of the shoal became a sort of flying fish for joy ; now leaping and sparkling in the sun, then gliding and diving among the bright weeds and corals, till one scarcely knew if they belonged to the water or the sky.”

Now the gray-headed teacher stopping at these words, did not go on to interpret his parable and make it plain, as sometimes before he had

done; he was asked to do so, but said, "Nay, my young friends, some of yourselves are quite sharp enough to explain my meaning; talk it over, and settle it together."

Upon this he went aside, while some of the more thoughtful children tried to teach the others what was designed to be learned from it. I dare say you have guessed much as they did; but, lest you should not, I will tell you what we think—for I was of the party—that the gray-headed man would have you to understand and remember.

The swift winding river may be taken as a picture of the world we live in; and the lively nimble little

fish that sport in it, put us in mind of *you*. The destroying pike are but too much like those men, and women, and youths, around us, who are selfish, and often cruel; ready, for their own base ends, to hurt your bodies, and ruin your minds.

The Arab boys, with their baited hooks, paint the same sort of ill-doers under another likeness or figure, namely, that sort of children and young people—nay, sometimes of elder people too—who would in many ways entice you to what is wrong, and leads to death: who have no more real kindness towards you than the Chaldeans had to the Jews they enslaved, of whom it is written,

“ They take up all of them with the angle, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag,” Hab. i. 15. Some of these would even carry their mischief and malice so far, as to set one child, or youth, on misleading and ensnaring another; as a fisher employs the live bait, or a fowler the decoy-bird—that is, a tame bird, used to draw other birds into the snare.

The roughness with which those young Arabians pulled the fish off the hook, or tore the hook from their bleeding gills, and the savage carelessness with which they threw them gasping on the grass, (I wish no English boys were like them,) made

some of us think of the unfeeling way in which the wicked ever treat their dupes when they are caught; and how little pity is shown by bad people, when those they have deceived and ruined are sick, and ready to die.

We thought, besides this, the silver-headed man meant to teach, that whether the young be fully made a prey by the worst of mankind, or enticed and entangled other ways, or whether, like a part of the poor fishes, they escape both the pike and the angler, still, if they follow "the course of this world," and are carried down the stream, it too surely brings them to gloom and misery at last.

The poor little fish who were borne down into the gloomy lake, were without blame; and had no sorrows that arose from sin or wrong-doing, only bodily pains and struggles which were shortly over. But those of our own race who “follow a multitude to do evil,” and let themselves go down the stream of evil custom, not caring for God’s will, or Christ’s teaching, must have another and a worse sort of pain, as the river of life grows swifter and darker, till it opens to the lake of death; and their distress at length, if they repent not, and seek no refuge, is but faintly pictured by the foul and sickening vapour and the briny wave, and the sulphur with

which it marks the sands, as it rolls in dismal murmurs along the shore.

All this, and more, we thought was in the heart of the gray-headed man, though he uttered it not; and we next looked with pleasure to the brighter side of his dream; as a child who has been gazing on a black thunder-storm in the north, turns with delight to the sun-beams that meet him from the west.

There was a grave talk between the elder school-children and me, as to what the old man's parable might mean, when it set forth another sort of fishers and nets, and their ponds, and their crumbs. It seemed to us all, however, after weighing the

matter, that he must intend the kind doings of those who seek poor and untaught children, and mostly the children of untaught or wicked parents, to draw them from the dangers and evils of the streets, or even of their own dwellings, to the safety and knowledge which may be had in a good and Christian school. Our heavenly Teacher and Saviour himself used this figure, telling his followers that he would make them “fishers of men;” and that they who had been used to fishing on the lakes of Galilee as their employ, from henceforth should “catch men.” But when he took another figure, and enjoined one of them, “feed my sheep,”—he added

likewise, “feed my lambs;”—and thus we may well judge, that when he sent them forth as “fishers” to “catch men” and to save them, he meant no less that they should fish for children, and “catch” *them*, as an early prey, from peril, to train them up for usefulness and peace.—The clear smooth waters of the pond, we thought, might fitly betoken the order and good learning which ought to be found in such a school; and the pleasant herbs and flowers around it, would aptly denote those harmless and cheerful sports which make work more easy and welcome.

It was soon agreed, that by “the bread cast upon the waters,” must

have been meant God's word of truth and grace, one crumb of which is more nourishing and precious than all idle, vain, and evil words of men, —often as hateful as the live bait, and as harmful as the hidden hooks of the young Arabs. We noticed also, that the bearers of nets with very fine meshes were most likely brought in to represent those kind people, who of late days have gathered the very little ones together in what are called Infant Schools; not quite fitly so called, since infant means one who cannot speak, and so is most like the fishes; whereas some of our so-called infants have tongues as nimble as their little feet, needing the

teacher's bridle. It is true I pointed out to the boys, what some of them were quick enough to see without my glasses—that there was here and there a flaw, or want of likeness, in the old man's parable; for instance, the pond he dreamed of, was a pond quite safe, in which no harm was to be found. The fish once brought there, were to swim no more in the river; whereas the school children must often go back to the evening mischief of an ill managed home, and pass through ways, or streets, where many bad things may be learned. Even if they are not let go alone, these hazards are not quite shut out: nay, it happens sometimes that those

who should guard them rather lead them into evil. To keep his likeness more true, he should have dreamed that the friendly net took up now and then, an infant pike or some such fish unawares, which so was launched into the pond, and lurking among the lilies, soon began to make mischief, or at least, to show his teeth; and further, perhaps, that there was a sluice, or channel, in the corner of the pond, where the waters slipped over a little wear, and ran down quickly to the dangerous stream; so that some poor fish went back from their hiding-place in the one, to the hazards of the other. It was not, however, so much our business to

think of what was left out in the dream, as what good there might be *in* it. So we talked next of the chain of pools; each broader and deeper than the last, and the merry leaps of the little finny tribe, as they grew stouter, upward from pool to pool.

“ Oh !” said little Ruth Guesswell, “ that is to show how infants move up through Class 1, 2, 3, till they are still better and happier children in Class 4.” “ True,” said Albert Thoughtful, “ but I am in some doubt as to what is meant by the rocky and dark outlet, and the beautiful lake beyond.”

“ I think,” said I, “ that you may take it to have a sort of twofold meaning. The passing of children

from the school into the first ways and doings of their after-life is, not seldom, hard; and much may then seem very dark and doubtful around them; yet if they have been well-trained, they will be much the more fit, by the help of God, to swim well and cheerfully in that great sea, and will find, at length, treasures and blessings there.

“ But, besides this, I cannot doubt that the ‘ dark rugged outlet’ of the dream, was meant to bring your thoughts to the passage from this world to another. Remember too, that this passage is sometimes suddenly made, even by children; by some while yet in the school, by

others soon after they leave it! But if they leave it, or are yet staying in it, with love to God, for his great mercies, in their hearts; with prayer to be forgiven for the sake of his dear Son who died to save them, and with a real desire to be made 'like him,' then we have his sure promise that, through the dark outlet of death, they shall pass to a place, far more beautiful than that broad lake with all its treasures and wonders. 'No mention shall be made' there 'of coral, or of pearls;' for the works of God in heaven, that great deep of his loving-kindness, though they may be somewhat like his fairest or grandest works below, will far, far surpass

“ Show yourselves to be really thankful, by doing all you can to please them, and be sure, first of all, that you take, and pick up very carefully, the bread of wisdom and knowledge and goodness which they offer you. If any little giddy fish, in the first clear pool, instead of opening his mouth wide for the crumbs, had been catching at May-flies, or playing at ‘hide and seek,’ among the water-cresses, just when a meal was brought, he would not have grown plump, nor strong enough to jump into the pool above.

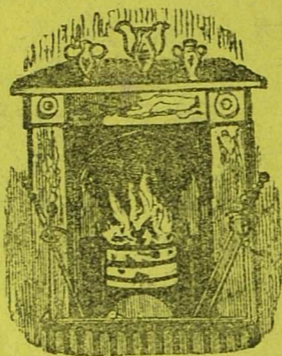
“ Do not forget, besides, that if you pass upward, through all tasks and trials, and reach the bright sea

of heaven at last, you must owe all, now, and then, and ever, to Him that raised up and called the fishers, and put into their hearts some love to him, and some good will to you. They, and their nets, and the safe pond, and the bread of life, and the golden sea, are all his. Nay he himself, even the beloved Son of God, who is 'one with the Father,' came 'from heaven' to 'seek and save' you, and gave up his own life, to the most painful death, that you might be freely forgiven and be made for ever happy, if you so believe in him, and receive his glad tidings, as to obey his will.

“ It was He, as we have told you,

who made his followers ‘fishers,’ to ‘catch’ lost ‘men’ and helpless children from their state of peril, that he might ‘draw’ them to himself.’ The place of teaching, and the place of worship, and the word of promise, and the heavenly rest—figured by the ponds, the bread, and the calm shining sea,—will all be yours—if you seek him—as His free gift, yet gained by his own deeds and sorrows. Praise and love him, therefore, and try to be truly his; then you will still be happy, when as gray-headed as the dreamer, and will find with him, and all the children of God, before long, a joy which is not a dream.”

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DARK and dismal is the night,
Beating rain and wind so high ;
Close the window shutters tight.
And the cheerful fire draw nigh.

While we sit within so warm,
Shelter'd, comfortable, safe,
Think how many 'bide the storm,
Who no home nor shelter have.

Glad these sorrows could we lighten,
We who suffer no such woe ;
Let at least contentment brighten
Every tranquil hour we know.