

A Captain of Salvation

By John Buchan

“**N**OR is it any matter of sorrow to us that the gods of the Pagans are no more. For whatsoever virtue was theirs is embodied in our most blessed faith. For whereas Apollo was the most noble of men in appearance and seemed to his devotees the incarnation (if I may use so sacred a word in a profane sense) of the beauty of the male, we have learned to apprehend a higher beauty of the Spirit, as in our blessed Saints. And whereas Jupiter was the king of the world, we have another and more excellent King, even God the Father, the holy Trinity. And whereas Mars was the god of war, the strongest and most warlike of beings, we have the great soldier of our cause, even the Captain of our Salvation. And whereas the most lovely of women was Venus, she whom all men worshipped, to us there is one greater and better, beautiful alike in spirit and body, to wit our Blessed Lady. So it is seen that whatever delights are carnal and of the flesh, such are met by greater delights of Christ and His Church.”—An Extract from the writings of Donisarius, a Monk of Padua.

The Salvation Captain sat in his room at the close of a windy March day. It had been a time of storm and sun, blustering showers and flying scuds of wind. The spring was at the threshold with its unrest and promise ; it was the season of turmoil and disquietude

disquietude in Nature, and turmoil and disquietude in those whose ears are open to her piping. Even there, in a three-pair back, in the odoriferous lands of Limehouse, the spring penetrated with scarcely diminished vigour. Dust had been whistling in the narrow streets; the leaden sky, filled with vanishing spaces of blue, had made the dull brick seem doubly sordid; and the sudden fresh gusts had caused the heavy sickening smells of stale food and unwholesome lodging to seem by contrast more hateful than words.

The Captain was a man of some forty years, tall, with a face deeply marked with weather and evil living. An air of super-induced gravity served only to accentuate the original. His countenance was a sort of epitome of life, full of traces of passion and nobler impulse, with now and then a shadow of refinement and a passing glimpse of breeding. His history had been of that kind which we would call striking, were it not so common. A gentleman born, a scholar after a fashion, with a full experience of the better side of civilisation, he had begun life as well as one can nowadays. For some time things had gone well; then came the utter and irretrievable ruin. A temptation which meets many men in their career met him, and he was overthrown. His name disappeared from the books of his clubs, people spoke of him in a whisper, his friends were crushed with shame. As for the man himself, he took it otherwise. He simply *went under*, disappeared from the ranks of life into the seething, struggling, disordered crowd below. He, if anything, rather enjoyed the change, for there was in him something of that brutality which is a necessary part of the natures of great leaders of men and great scoundrels. The accidents of his environment had made him the latter; he had almost the power of proving the former, for in his masterful brow and firm mouth there were hints of extraordinary strength.

His

His history after his downfall was as picturesque a record as needs be. Years of wandering and fighting, sin and cruelty, generosity and meanness followed. There were few trades and few parts of the earth in which he had not tried his luck. Then there had come a violent change. Somewhere on the face of the globe he had met a man and heard words; and the direction of his life veered round of a sudden to the opposite. Culture, family ties, social bonds had been of no avail to wean him from his headstrong impulses. An ignorant man, speaking plainly some strong sentences which are unintelligible to three-fourths of the world, had worked the change; and spring found him already two years a servant in that body of men and women who had first sought to teach him the way of life.

These two years had been years of struggle, which only a man who has lived such a life can hope to enter upon. A nature which has run riot for two decades is not cabined and confined at a moment's notice. He had been a wanderer like Cain, and the very dwelling in houses had its hardships for him. But in this matter even his former vice came to aid him. He had been proud and self-willed before in his conflict with virtue. He would be proud and self-willed now in his fight with evil. To his comrades and to himself he said that only the grace of God kept him from wrong; in his inmost heart he felt that the grace of God was only an elegant name for his own pride of will.

As he sat now in that unlovely place, he felt sick of his surroundings and unnaturally restive. The day had been a trying one for him. In the morning he had gone West on some money-collecting errand, one which his soul loathed, performed only as an exercise in resignation. It was a bitter experience for him to pass along Piccadilly in his shabby uniform, the badge in the eyes of most people of half-crazy weakness. He had passed restaurants
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and eating-houses, and his hunger had pained him, for at home he lived on the barest. He had seen crowds of well-dressed men and women, some of whom he dimly recognised, who had no time even to glance at the insignificant wayfarer. Old ungodly longings after luxury had come to disturb him. He had striven to banish them from his mind, and had muttered to himself many texts of Scripture and spoken many catchword prayers, for the fiend was hard to exorcise.

The afternoon had been something worse, for he had been deputed to go to a little meeting in Poplar, a gathering of factory-girls and mechanics who met there to talk of the furtherance of Christ's kingdom. On his way the spirit of spring had been at work in him. The whistling of the wind among the crazy chimneys, the occasional sharp gust from the river, the strong smell of a tanyard, even the rough working-dress of the men he passed, recalled to him the roughness and vigour of his old life. In the forenoon his memories had been of the fashion and luxury of his youth; in the afternoon they were of his world-wide wanderings, their hardships and delights. When he came to the stuffy upper-room where the meeting was held, his state of mind was far from the meek resignation which he sought to cultivate. A sort of angry unrest held him, which he struggled with till his whole nature was in a ferment. The meeting did not tend to soothe him. Brother followed sister in aimless remarks, seething with false sentiment and sickly enthusiasm, till the strong man was near to disgust. The things which he thought he loved most dearly, of a sudden became loathsome. The hysterical fervours of the girls, which only yesterday he would have been ready to call "love for the Lord," seemed now perilously near absurdity. The loud "Amens" and "Hallelujahs" of the men jarred, not on his good taste (that had long gone under), but on his sense of the ludicrous.

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He found himself more than once admitting the unregenerate thought, "What wretched nonsense is this? When men are living and dying, fighting and making love all around, when the glorious earth is calling with a hundred voices, what fools and children they are to babble in this way!" But this ordeal went by. He was able to make some conventional remarks at the end, which his hearers treasured as "precious and true," and he left the place with the shamefaced feeling that for the first time in his new life he had acted a part.

It was about five in the evening ere he reached his room and sat down to his meal. There was half a stale loaf, a pot of cheap tea, and some of that extraordinary compound which the humorous grocers of the East call butter. He was hungry and ate without difficulty, but such fragments of æsthetic liking as he still possessed rose against it. He looked around his room. The table was common deal, supported by three legs and a bit of an old clothes-prop. On the horsehair sofa among the dusty tidies was his Bible, one or two publications of the Army, two bundles of the *War Cry*, some hymn-books, and—strange relic of the past—a tattered Gaboriau. On the mantelpiece was a little Burmese idol, which acted as a watch-stand, some hideous photographs framed in black, and a china Duke of Wellington. Near it was his bed, ill-made and dingy, and at the bottom an old sea-trunk. On the top lay one relic of gentility, which had escaped the wreck of his fortunes, a silver-backed hair-brush.

The place filled him with violent repugnance. A smell of rich, greasy fish came upstairs to his nostrils; outside a woman was crying; and two children sprawled and giggled beside his door. This certainly was a wretched hole, and his life was hard almost beyond words. He solemnly reviewed his recent existence. On the one side he set down the evils—bad pay, severe and painful
The Yellow Book—Vol. VIII. 1 work,

work, poor lodgings, poor food and dismal company. Something stopped him just as he was about to set down the other. "Oh," he cried, "is the love of Jesus nothing that I think like that?" And he began to pray rapidly, "Lord, I believe, forgive my unbelief."

For a little he sat in his chair looking straight before him. It would be impossible to put down in words the peculiar hardness of his struggle. For he had to fight with his memory and his inclinations, both of which are to a certain extent independent of the will; and he did this not by sheer strength of resolution, but by fixing his thought upon an abstraction and attempting to clothe it in warm, lovable attributes. He thought upon the countless mercies of God towards him, as his creed showed them; and so strong was the man that in a little he had gotten the victory.

By-and-by he got up and put on his overcoat, thin and patched, and called so only by courtesy. He suddenly remembered his work, how he was engaged that night to lead a crusade through some of the worst streets by the river. Such a crusade was the romantic description by certain imaginative Salvationists of a procession of some dozen men and women with tambourines and concertinas, singing hymns, and sowing the good seed broadcast in the shape of vociferous invitations to mercy and pardon. He hailed it as a sort of anodyne to his pain. There was small time for morbid recollection and introspection if one were engaged in leading a crew of excited followers in places where they were by no means sure of a favourable reception.

There was a noise without on the stairs, then a rap at the door, and Brother Leather entered, whom Whitechapel and the Mile-End Road knew for the most vigilant of soldiers and violent of exhorters.

"Are you strong in the Lord, Captain?" he asked. "For to-night we're

we're goin' to the stronghold of Satan. It haint no use a invitin' and invitin'. It haint no good 'nless you compel them to come in. And by the 'elp of God we 'opes to do it. Sister Stokes, she has her tamb'rine, and there's five concertinies from Gray Street, and Brother Clover's been prayin' all day for a great outpourin' of blessin'. 'The fields are wite unto th' 'arvest,' " he quoted.

The Captain rose hastily. "Then hadn't we better be going?" he said. "We're to start at seven, and it's half-past six already."

"Let's have a word of prayer fust," said the other; and straightway, in defiance of all supposed rules of precedence, this strange private soldier flopped on his knees beside the sofa and poured forth entreaties to his Master. This done he arose, and along with the Captain went down the dingy stairway to the door, and out into the narrow darkening street. The newly-lit gas lamps sent a flicker on the men's faces—the one flabby, soft and weak, but with eyes like coals of fire; the other as strong as steel, but listless and uneager. As they passed, a few ragged street-boys cried the old phrase of derision, "I love Jesus," at the sight of the caps and the red-banded coats. Here again the one smiled as if he had heard the highest praise, while the other glanced angrily through the gloom as if he would fain rend the urchins, as the bears did the children who mocked Elisha.

At last they turned down a stone-paved passage and came into a little room lined with texts which represented the headquarters of the Army in the district. Sitting on the benches or leaning against the wall were a dozen or so of men and women, all wearing the familiar badge, save one man who had come in his working corduroys, and one girl in a black waterproof. The faces of the men were thin and eager, telling of many sacrifices cheerfully made for their cause, of spare dinners, and nights spent out o' bed, of heart-searchings and painful self-communings, of fervent praying
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and violent speaking. Thin were the women too, thin and weary, with eyes in which utter lassitude strove against enthusiasm, and backs which ached as they rested. They had come from their labours, as seamstresses and milliners, as shop-girls and laundry-maids, and, instead of enjoying a well-won rest, were devoting their few hours of freedom to the furtherance of an ideal which many clever men have derided. Verily it is well for the world that abstract truth is not the measure of right and wrong, of joy and sorrow.

The Captain gave a few directions to the band and then proceeded to business. They were silent men and women in private life. The world was far too grave a matter for them to talk idly. It was only in the streets that speech came thick and fast; here they were as silent as sphinxes—sphinxes a little tired, not with sitting but with going to and fro on the earth.

“Where are we going?” asked one woman.

The Captain considered for a minute ere he replied. “Down by the Modern Wharves,” he said, “then up Blind Street and Gray Alley to Juke’s Buildings, where we can stop and speak. You know the place, friend Leather?”

“Do I know my own dwellin’?” asked the man thus addressed in a surprised tone. “Wy, I’ve lived there off an’ on for twenty year, and I could tell some tyles o’ the plyce as would make yer that keen you couldn’t wait a minute but must be off doin’ Christ’s work.”

“We’ll be off now,” said the Captain, who had no desire for his assistant’s reminiscences. “I’ll go first with the flag and the rest of you can come in rank. See that you sing out well, for the Lord has much need of singing in these barren lands.” The desultory band clattered down the wooden stair into the street.

Once here the Captain raised the hymn. It was “Oh, haven’t
I been

I been happy since I met the Lord ? ” some rhapsodical words set to a popular music-hall air. To the chance hearer who hailed from more civilised places the thing must have seemed little better than a blasphemous parody. But all element of farce was absent from the hearts of the grim-faced men and women ; and the scene as it lay, the squalid street with its filth stirred by the March wind, the high shifting sky overhead, the flicker and glare of the street lamps as each gust jostled them, the irregular singing, the marching amid the laughs or silent scorn of the bystanders—all this formed a picture which had in it more of the elements of the tragic or the noble than the ludicrous.

And the heart of the man at the head of the little procession was the stage of a drama which had little of the comic about it. The street, the open air, had inflamed again the old longings. Something of the enthusiasm of his following had entered into his blood ; but it was a perverted feeling, and instead of desiring earnestly the success of his mission, he longed madly, fiercely for forbidden things. In the short encounter in his room he had come off the victor ; but it had only been a forced peace, and now the adversary was at him tooth and nail once more. The meeting with the others had roused in him a deep disgust. Heaven above, was it possible that he, the cock of his troop, the man whom all had respected after a fashion, as men will respect a strong man, should be a bear-leader to fools ! The shame of it took him of a sudden, and as he shouted the more loudly he felt his heart growing hot within him at the thought. But, strangely enough, his very pride came once more to help him. At the thought, “ Have I really come to care what men say and think about me ? ” the strong pride within him rose in revolt and restored him to himself.

But the quiet was to be of short duration. A hateful, bitter
thought

thought began to rise in him—"What am I in the world but a man of no importance? And I might have been—oh, I might have been anything I chose! I made a mess of it at the beginning, but is it not possible for a man to right himself again with the world? Have I ever tried it? Instead of setting manfully to the task, I let myself drift, and this is what I have become. And I might have been so different. I might have been back at my old clubs with my old friends, married, maybe, to a pretty wife, with a house near the Park, and a place in the country with shooting and riding to hounds, and a devilish fine time of it. And here I must go on slaving and gabbling, doing a fool's work at a drainer's pay." Then came a burst of sharp mental anguish, remorse, hate, evil craving. But it passed, and a flood of counter-thoughts came to oppose it. The Captain was still unregenerate in nature, as the phrase goes, but the leaven was working in him. The thought of all that he had gained—God's mercy, pardon for his sins, a sure hope of happiness hereafter, and a glorified ideal to live by—made him stop short in his regrets.

The hymn had just dragged itself out to its quavering close. Wheeling round, he turned a burning eye on his followers. "Let us raise another, friends," he cried; and began, "The Devil and me we can't agree"—which the rest heartily joined in.

And now the little procession reached a new stage in its journey. The narrow street had grown still more restricted. Gin palaces poured broad splashes of garish light across the pavement. Slat-ternly women and brutal men lined the footpath, and in the kennels filthy little urchins grinned and quarrelled. Every now and then some well-dressed, rakish artiste, or lady of the half-world, pushed her way through the crowds, or a policeman, tall and silent, stalked among the disorderly. Vanity Fair and its denizens were everywhere, from the chattering hucksters to the leering blackguards
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and sleek traffickers in iniquity. If anything on earth can bring a ray of decency into such a place, then in God's name let it come, whether it be called sense or rant by stay-at-home philosophers.

The hymn-singing added one more element to the discordant noise. But there was in it a suggestion of better things, which was absent from the song of the streets. The obvious chords of the music in that place acquired an adventitious beauty, just as the song of a humble hedge-linnet is lovely amid the croaking of ravens and hooting of owls. The people on the pavement looked on with varying interest. To most it was an everyday exhibition of the unaccountable. Women laughed, and shrieked coarse railleries; some of the men threatened, others looked on in amused scorn; but there was no impulse to active violence. The thing was tolerated as yonder seller of cheap watchguards was borne; for it is an unwritten law in the slums, that folk may do their own pleasure, as long as they cease from interfering offensively with the enjoyment of others.

"'Oo's the cove wi' the flag, Bill?" asked one woman. "'E haint so bad as the rest. Most loikely 'e's taken up the job to dodge the nick."

"Dodge the nick yersel', Lizer," said the man addressed. "Wy, it's the chap's wye o' making his livin', a roarin' and a preachin' like that. S'help me, I'd rather cry 'Welks' any dye than go about wi' sich a crew."

A woman, garishly adorned, with a handsome flushed face, looked up at the Captain.

"Why, it's Jack," she cried. "Bless me if it ain't Jack. Jack, Jack, what are you after now, not coming to speak to me. Don't you mind Sal, your little Sal. I'm coming to yer, I ain't forgotten yer." And she began to push her way into mid-street.

The Captain looked to the side, and his glance rested upon her face.

face. It was as if the Devil and all his angels were upon him that night. Evil memories of his past life thronged thick and fast upon him. He had already met and resisted the world, and now the flesh had come to torment him. But here his armour was true and fast. This was a temptation which he had choked at the very outset of his reformation. He looked for one moment at her, and in the utter loathing and repugnance of that look, she fell back; and the next instant was left behind.

The little streets, which radiate from the wharf known as Mordon's, are so interlaced and crooked that to find one's way in them is more a matter of chance than good guiding even to the initiated. The houses are small and close, the residence of the very sweepings of the population; the shops are ship-chandlers and low eating-houses, pawnshops, emporia of cheap jewellery, and remnant drapers. At this hour of the night there is a blaze of dull gas-light on either side, and the proprietors of the places of custom stand at their doors inviting the bystanders to inspect their goods. This is the hotbed of legalised crime, the rendezvous of half the wickedness of the earth. Lascars, Spaniards, Frenchmen jostle Irishmen, and Scotsmen, and the true-born Englishmen in these narrow purlieus. If a man disappears utterly from view you may be sure to find him somewhere in that network of alleys, for there it would be hard for the law to penetrate *incolis invitis*. It is a sort of Cave of Adullam on the one hand, to which the morally halt and maimed of all nations resort; and, on the other, a nursery of young vice and unformed devilry. Sailors straddled about the pavement, or stood in knots telling their tales in loud voices and plentiful oaths; every beershop was continually discharging its stream of filthy occupants, filthy and prosperous. The element of squalor and misery was here far less in evidence. All the inhabitants seemed gorged and well clad, but their faces
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were stained with vice so horrible that poverty and tatters would have been a welcome relief.

The Salvation band penetrated into this Sodom with fear in the heart of each member. It was hard for the Gospel to strive with such seared and branded consciences. The repulsive, self-satisfied faces of the men, the smug countenances of the women, made that little band seem hopeless and Quixotic in the extreme. The Captain felt it, too ; but in him there was mingled another feeling. He thought of himself as a combatant entering the arena. He felt dimly that some great struggle was impending, some monstrous temptation, some subtle wile of the Evil One. The thought made him the more earnest. " Sing up, men," he cried, " the Devil is strong in this place."

It was the truth, and the proof awaited him. A man stepped out from among the bystanders and slapped his shoulder. The Captain started and looked. It was the Devil in person.

" Hullo, Jack ! " said the new-comer. " Good God, who'd have thought of seeing you here ? Have you gone off your head now ? "

The Captain shivered. He knew the speaker for one of his comrades of the old days, the most daring and jovial of them all. The two had been hand and glove in all manner of evil. They had loved each other like brothers, till the great change came over the one, which fixed a gulf between them for ever.

" You don't mean to tell me you've taken up with this infernal nonsense, Jack ? No, I won't believe it. It's just another of your larks. You were always the one for originality."

" Go away, Hilton," said the Captain hoarsely, " go away. I've done with you. I can't see you any more."

" What the deuce has come over you, Jack ? Not speak to me any more ! Why, what foolery is this ? You've gone and
turned

turned a regular old wife, bless me if you haven't. Oh, man, give it up. It's not worth it. Don't you remember the fun we've had in our time? Gad, Jack, when you and I stood behind yon big tree in Kaffraria with twenty yelling devils wanting our blood; don't you remember how I fell and you got over me, and, though you were bleeding like a pig, you kept them off till the Cape troopers came up? And when we were lost, doing picketing up in the Drakenberg, you mind how we chummed together for our last meal? And heavens! it was near our last. I feel that infernal giddiness still. And yet you tell me to go away."

"Oh, Hilton," said the Captain, "come and be one of us. The Lord's willing to receive you, if you'll only come. I've got the blessing, and there's one waiting for you if you'll only take it."

"Blessing be damned!" said the other with a laugh. "What do I want with your blessing when there's life and the world to see? What's the good of poking round here, and crying about the love of Jesus and singing twaddle, and seeing nobody but old wives and white-faced shopmen, when you might be out on the open road, with the wind and the stars and the sun, and meet with men, and have your fling like a man. Don't you remember the days at Port Said, when the old Frenchman twanged his banjo and the girls danced and—hang it, don't you feel the smell of the sand and the heat in your nostrils, you old fool?"

"Oh, my God!" said the Captain, "I do. Go away, Hilton. For God's sake, go away and leave me!"

"Can't you think," went on the other, "of the long nights when we dropped down the Irrawaddy, of the whistle of the wind in the white sails, and the singing of the boatmen, and the sick-suck of the alligators among the reeds; and how we went ashore at the little village and got arrack from the natives, and made a holy

holy sight of the place in the morning ? It was worth it, though we got the sack for it, old man."

The Captain made no answer. He was muttering something to himself. It might have been a prayer.

"And then there was that time when we were up country in Queensland, sugar farming in the bush, thinking a billy of tea the best thing on earth, and like to faint with the work and the heat. But, Jove, wasn't it fine to head off the cattle when you knew you might have a big bull's horn in your side every minute ? And then at night to sit outside the huts and smoke pig-tail and tell stories that would make your hair rise ! We were a queer lot, Jack, but we were men, *men*, do you hear ?"

A flood of recollection came over the Captain, vehement, all-powerful. He felt the magic of the East, the wonder of the South, the glory of the North burning in his heart. The old wild voices were calling him, voices of land and sea, the tongues of the moon and the stars and the beasts of the field, the halcyon voices of paganism and nature which are still strong in the earth. Behind him rose the irregular notes of the hymn ; at his side was the tempter, and in his own heart was the prince of the world, the master of pleasure, the great juggler of pain. In that man there was being fought the old fight, which began in the Garden, and will never end, the struggle between the hateful right and the delicious wrong.

"Oh man, come with me," cried Hilton, "I've got a berth down there in a ship which sails to-morrow, and we'll go out to our old place, where they'll be glad to get us, and we'll have a devilish good time. I can't be staying here, with muggy stinks, and white-faced people, and preaching and praying, and sloppy weather. Come on, and in a month we'll be seeing the old Coal-sack above us, and smelling the palms and the sea-water ; and then, after that, there'll

there'll be the Bush, the pines and the gum-trees and the blue-sky, and the hot, clear air, and rough-riding and adventure ; and by God we'll live like gentlemen and fine fellows, and never come back to this cursed hole any more. Come on, and leave the psalm-singing."

A spasm of convulsive pain, of exquisite agony, of heart-breaking struggle came over the Captain's face, stayed a moment, and passed. He turned round to his followers. "Sing louder, lads," he cried, "we're fighting a good fight." And then his voice broke down, and he stumbled blindly on, still clutching the flag.

Like the captain of a ship, Jesus leads our salvation, but he is perfect and will never fail. Join pastor Cuenin as he examines Christ through the scripture. IdentifierTheCaptainOfOurSalvation. Year2012. plus-circle Add Review. comment. Reviews. There are no reviews yet.