Two

Courage

YOU FALL into the water. You are not daunted by the great watery mass. You make good use of your arms and legs, grateful to the teacher who taught you how to swim. You grapple with the waves and you escape. You have been brave.

You are asleep. “Fire!” The cry of alarm has awakened you. You leap from your bed and see the red glare of the blaze. You are not stricken with mortal fear. You run through the smoke, the sparks, the flames, to safety. This is courage.

Some time ago I visited an infant school in England. The little school-children were between three and seven years old. There were both boys and girls, who were busy knitting, drawing, listening to stories, singing.

The teacher told me, “We are going to try the fire-alarm. Of course there is no fire, but they have been taught to get up and go out promptly at the alarm-signal.”

He blew his whistle. Instantly the children left their books, pencils and knitting-needles, and stood up. On a second signal they filed out into the open air. In a few moments the classroom was empty. These little children had learned to face the danger of fire and to be brave.

For whose sake did you swim? For your own.

For whose sake did you run through the flames? For your own.

For whose sake would the children resist the fear of fire? For their own.

The courage shown in each case was for the sake of self. Was this wrong? Certainly not. It is right to take care of your life and to defend it bravely. But there is a greater courage, the
Words of Long Ago

courage which is shown for the sake of others.

* *

Let me tell you the story of Madhava as it was recorded by Bhavabhuti.

He is kneeling outside a temple and hears a cry of distress.
He finds a way to enter and looks into the sanctuary of the goddess Chamunda.

A victim is about to be slain in honour of this terrible goddess. It is poor Malati. The girl has been carried away in her sleep. She is all alone with the priest and priestess, and the priest raises his knife just as Malati is thinking of Madhava whom she loves:

O Madhava! Lord of my heart,
Oh, may I after death live in thy memory.
They do not die whom love embalms in long and fond remembrance.

With a shout, brave Madhava leaps into the chamber of sacrifice and engages the priest in mortal combat. Malati is saved.

For whom did Madhava show courage? Was he fighting for himself? Yes — but that was not the only reason for his courage. He was fighting also for the sake of another. He had heard a cry of distress and it had touched the brave heart in his breast.

* *

If you give it some thought, you will recall having seen similar deeds. You have surely seen a man, woman or child helped by another human being who came running in response to the cry of alarm.

You must also have read in the newspapers or in history about similar acts of bravery. You have heard about firemen who
rescue people from blazing houses; of miners who go down into
deep shafts to bring out their companions imperilled by flood,
fire or poisonous gas; of men who venture into houses shaken
by earthquake and who in spite of the danger from crumbling
walls, pick up and carry out the helpless people who would
otherwise die beneath the ruins; and of citizens who for the sake
of their town or their country confront the enemy and undergo
hunger, thirst, wounds or death.

So we have seen what is courage to help oneself and what
is courage to help others.

I shall tell you the story of Vibhishan the hero. He braved a
danger that was greater than the danger of death: he braved the
fury of a king and gave him the wise advice that others dared
not voice.

The demon-king of Lanka was Ravana of the Ten Heads.

Ravana had stolen lady Sita away from her husband and
carried her off in his chariot to his palace on the island of Lanka.

Sumptuous was the palace and delightful the garden in
which he imprisoned the princess Sita. Yet she was unhappy
and every day she would shed tears, not knowing whether she
would ever see her Lord Rama again.

Glorious Rama learnt from Hanuman the monkey-king
where his wife Sita was held captive. He set out with noble
Lakshman, his brother, and a great army of heroes to the rescue
of the prisoner.

When the demon Ravana learnt of the arrival of Rama, he
trembled with fear.

The advice he received was of two kinds. A crowd of
courtiers thronged around his throne saying:

“All is well; have no fear, O Ravana. Gods and demons you
have conquered: you will have no difficulty in conquering Rama
and his companions, the monkeys of Hanuman.”
Words of Long Ago

When these noisy counsellors had left the king, his brother Vibhishan entered, knelt and kissed his feet. Then he rose and sat at the right hand of the throne.

“O my brother,” he said, “if you wish to live happily and keep the throne of this beautiful island of Lanka, give back the lovely Sita, for she is the wife of another. Go to Rama and ask his forgiveness, and he will not turn away his face. Be not arrogant and foolhardy.”

A wise man, Malyavan, heard these words and was glad. He exclaimed to the king of demons:

“Take your brother’s words to heart, for he has spoken the truth.”

“Both of you have evil designs,” replied the king, “for you take the side of my foes.”

And the eyes of his ten heads flashed with such fury that Malyavan fled from the room in terror. But Vibhishan, in the bravery of his soul, remained.

“Sire,” he said, “in the heart of each man there is both wisdom and foolishness. If wisdom dwells in his breast, life goes well with him; if it is foolishness, all goes ill. I fear that you harbour foolishness in your breast, O my brother, for you give ear to those who give bad advice. They are not your true friends.”

He fell silent and kissed the feet of the king.

“Wretch!” cried Ravana. “You too are one of my enemies. Speak no more senseless words to me. Talk to the hermits in the woods but not to one who has been victorious over all the enemies he has fought.”

And as he shouted he kicked his brave brother Vibhishan.

So, with a heavy heart, his brother rose and left the king’s house.

Knowing no fear, he had spoken frankly to Ravana; and since the ten-headed one would not listen, Vibhishan had no choice but to leave.

Vibhishan’s act was one of physical courage, for he did not
fear his brother’s blows; but it was also an act of mental courage, for he did not hesitate to utter words that the other courtiers, physically as brave as he, would not have let fall from their lips. This courage of the mind is known as moral courage.

Such was the courage of Moses, the leader of Israel, who demanded from the Pharaoh of Egypt the freedom of the oppressed Jewish people.

Such was the courage of Mohammed, the Prophet, who imparted his religious thought to the Arabs, and who refused to be silenced even though they threatened him with death.

Such was the courage of Siddhartha, the Blessed One, who taught the people of India a new and noble path, and was not terrified by the evil spirits who assailed him under the Bo-tree.

Such was the courage of Christ, who preached to the people: “Love one another,” and was not intimidated by the pontiffs of Jerusalem who forbade him to teach, nor by the Romans who crucified him.

So we have noted three kinds, three degrees of courage:

Physical courage for oneself.

Courage for the near one, the friend, the neighbour in distress, the threatened motherland.

Finally, the moral courage that enables one to stand up to unjust men, however powerful they may be, and to make them listen to the voice of right and truth.

The Rajah of Almora, in order to repel some invaders who had raided his mountain country, enrolled a number of men in a new regiment and provided each one with a good sword.

“Forward, march!” commanded the Rajah.

Instantly the men unsheathed their swords with a great clang
and flourished them with loud cries.

“What is this?” demanded the Rajah.

“Sire,” they replied, “we want to be ready so that the enemy
does not take us by surprise.”

“You can be of no use to me, you nervous and excitable
men,” he told them. “Go home, all of you.”

You will notice that the Rajah was not impressed by all this
noise and waving of swords. He knew that true bravery needs
no clamour and clash.

In the following story, on the other hand, you will observe how
calmly the people behaved and yet how brave they were in face
of mortal peril at sea.

Towards the end of March 1910, a Scottish vessel was carry-
ing passengers from Australia to the Cape of Good Hope. There
was no trace of a cloud in the sky and the sea was calm and
blue.

Suddenly the ship struck a reef six miles off the west coast
of Australia.

Immediately the whole crew was on the move, each man
hurrying as whistles were blown. But this noise was not the
result of confusion and panic.

An order rang out: “Man the boats!”

The passengers put on their life-belts.

A blind man led by his servant walked across the deck.
Everyone made way for him. He was helpless and all wanted
him to be the first to be saved.

A short time later the ship had been evacuated, and soon it
sank.

On one of the life-boats a woman began to sing. And in spite
of the sound of the waves which at times drowned her voice,
the oarsmen could hear the refrain which put strength into their
arms:
Courage

*Pull for the shore, sailors,*  
*Pull for the shore.*

The shipwrecked people reached the shore at last and were taken in by some good fishing folk.  
Not one passenger had been lost. In this way four hundred and fifty people had saved themselves by their quiet courage.

* ∗ *

Let me tell you more about this calm courage that accomplishes useful and noble things without show or flourish.

A deep river ran past an Indian village of five hundred houses.

The people of this village had not yet heard the teachings of Lord Siddhartha, and the Blessed One decided to go to them and speak to them of the Noble Path.

He sat beneath a great tree which spread its branches over the riverside, and the villagers gathered on the opposite bank. Then he began to speak and preached his message of love and purity. And his words were carried over the flowing waters as if by miracle. Yet the people of the village refused to believe in what he taught them, and murmured against him.

Only one of them wanted to know more and wished to come closer to the Blessed One.

There was neither bridge nor ferry. And the old legend tells that, strong in his courage, the man began to walk upon the deep water of the river. And so he reached the Master, greeted him and listened to his words with great joy.

Did this man really cross the river, as we are told? We do not know. But in any case he had the courage to take the path that leads towards progress. And the people of his village, touched by his example, then paid heed to the teachings of the Buddha; and their minds were opened to nobler thoughts.

* ∗ *
There is a courage which can make you cross rivers and another that enables you to take the right path; but even more courage is needed to stay on the right path than to enter it.

Listen to the parable of the hen and her chicks:

Siddhartha, the Blessed One, used to instruct his disciples to do their best and then to trust that the best would bear its fruit.

“Just as,” he said, “a hen lays eggs and broods on them and never thinks of fretting: ‘Will my little chicks be able to break out of their shells with their beaks and see the light of day?’ you too should have no fear: if you are persistent in the Noble Path, you also will come to the light.”

And this is true courage: to walk the straight path, to brave storm, darkness and suffering and to persevere, moving ever forward, in spite of everything, towards the light.

* * *

Long, long ago, when Brahmadatta ruled in Benares, one of his enemies, king of another land, trained an elephant to wage war on him.

War was declared. The splendid elephant bore the king his master up to the walls of Benares.

From the top of the walls, the people of the besieged city hurled down boiling hot liquids and shot stones with their slings. At first the elephant retreated before this terrifying rain.

But the man who had trained him ran towards him crying:

“O elephant, you are a hero! Act like a hero and pull the gates to the ground!”

Encouraged by these words, the great creature charged and burst through the gates, leading his king to victory.

This is how courage triumphs over obstacles and difficulties and opens the gates to victory.

* * *
Courage

And see how an encouraging word can give help to man and animal alike.

A good Muslim book gives us an example of this in the story of Abu Said, the poet with a brave heart.

His friends, who had learnt that he lay sick with fever, came one day to ask for news of his health. His son received them at the door of the house, a smile on his lips, for the patient was feeling better.

They came in and sat down in the sick man’s room and were surprised to hear him chatting with his usual good humour. Then, as it was a hot day, he fell asleep, and so did all the others.

Towards evening, they all awoke. Abu Said ordered refreshments to be served to his guests and incense to be lit so that the room might be filled with fragrance.

Abu Said prayed for a while, then he rose and recited a little poem of his own composition:

Despair not in your grief, for a joyous hour will come and take it all away;
The burning simoon may blow, and yet change into a gentle breeze;
A dark cloud may rise, but it passes away and brings no flood;
A fire may kindle and yet be smothered, leaving chest and casket untouched;
Pain comes but also goes.
Therefore be patient when troubles come, for Time is the father of wonders;
And from the peace of God hope for many blessings to come.

They all returned to their homes delighted and strengthened by this beautiful poem of hope. And so it was that a sick man helped his friends in good health.

Whosoever is courageous can give courage to others, just as
Words of Long Ago

the flame of one candle can light another.
Brave boys and girls who read this story, learn how to encourage others, and be courageous yourselves.