

PROLOGUE

THE RELAY-RACE

The shining blue waters of two wonderful gulfs were busy with fishing boats and little ships. The vessels came under their square sails and were driven by galley-slaves with great oars.

A Greek boy standing, two thousand years ago, on the wonderful mountain of the Acro-Corinth that leaps suddenly from the plain above Corinth to a pinnacle over a thousand feet high, could see the boats come sailing from the east, where they hailed from the Piræus and Ephesus and the marble islands of the Ægean Sea. Turning round he could watch them also coming from the West up the Gulf of Corinth from the harbours of the Gulf and even from the Adriatic Sea and Brundisium.

In between the two gulfs lay the Isthmus of Corinth to which the men on the ships were sailing and rowing.

The people were all in holiday dress for the great athletic sports were to be held on that day and the next;—the sports that drew, in those ancient days, over thirty thousand Greeks from all the country round; from the towns on the shores of the two gulfs and from the mountain-lands of Greece,—from Parnassus and Helicon

and Delphi, from Athens and the villages on the slopes of Hymettus and even from Sparta.

These sports, which were some of the finest ever held in the whole world, were called—because they were held on this isthmus—the Isthmian Games.

The athletes wrestled. They boxed with iron-studded leather straps over their knuckles. They fought lions brought across the Mediterranean (the Great Sea as they called it) from Africa, and tigers carried up the Khyber Pass across Persia from India. They flung spears, threw quoits and ran foot-races. Amid the wild cheering of thirty thousand throats the charioteers drove their frenzied horses, lathered with foam, around the roaring stadium.

One of the most beautiful of these races has a strange hold on the imagination. It was a relay-race. This is how it was run.

Men bearing torches stood in a line at the starting point. Each man belonged to a separate team. Away in the distance stood another row of men waiting. Each of these was the comrade of one of those men at the starting point. Farther on still, out of sight, stood another row and then another and another.

At the word “Go” the men at the starting point leapt forward, their torches burning. They ran at top speed towards the waiting men and then gasping for breath, each passed his torch to his comrade in the next row. He, in turn, seizing the flaming torch, leapt forward and dashed along the course toward the next relay, who again raced on and on till at last one man dashed past the winning post with his torch burning ahead of all the others, amid the applauding cheers of the multitude.

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The Greeks, who were very fond of this race, coined a proverbial phrase from it. Translated it runs:

“Let the torch-bearers hand on the flame to the others” or
“Let those who have the light pass it on.”

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That relay-race of torch-bearers is a living picture of the wonderful relay-race of heroes who, right through the centuries, have, with dauntless courage and a scorn of danger and difficulty, passed through thrilling adventures in order to carry the Light across the continents and oceans of the world.

The torch-bearers! The long race of those who have borne, and still carry the torches, passing them on from hand to hand, runs before us. A little ship puts out from Seleucia, bearing a man who had caught the fire in a blinding blaze of light on the road to Damascus. Paul crosses the sea and then threads his way through the cities of Cyprus and Asia Minor, passes over the blue Ægean to answer the call from Macedonia. We see the light quicken, flicker and glow to a steady blaze in centre after centre of life, till at last the torch-bearer reaches his goal in Rome.

“Yes, without cheer of sister or of daughter,
Yes, without stay of father or of son,
Lone on the land and homeless on the water
Pass I in patience till the work be done.”

Centuries pass and men of another age, taking the light that Paul had brought, carry the torch over Apennine and Alp, through dense forests where wild beasts and wilder savages roam, till they cross the North Sea and the light reaches the fair-haired Angles of Britain, on whose name Augustine had exercised his punning humour, when he said,

“Not Angles, but Angels.” From North and South, through Columba and Aidan, Wilfred of Sussex and Bertha of Kent, the light came to Britain.

“Is not our life,” said the aged seer to the Mercian heathen king as the Missionary waited for permission to lead them to Christ, “like a sparrow that flies from the darkness through the open window into this hall and flutters about in the torchlight for a few moments to fly out again into the darkness of the night. Even so we know not whence our life comes nor whither it goes. This man can tell us. Shall we not receive his teaching?” So the English, through these torch-bearers, come into the light.

The centuries pass by and in 1620 the little Mayflower, bearing Christian descendants of those heathen Angles—new torch-bearers, struggles through frightful tempests to plant on the American Continent the New England that was indeed to become the forerunner of a New World.¹

A century and a half passes and down the estuary of the Thames creeps another sailing ship.

The Government officer shouts his challenge:

“What ship is that and what is her cargo?”

“The *Duff*,” rings back the answer, “under Captain Wilson, bearing Missionaries to the South Sea.”

The puzzled official has never heard of such beings! But the little ship passes on and after adventures and tempests in many seas at last reaches the far Pacific. There the torch-bearers pass from island to island and the light flames like a beacon fire across many a blue lagoon and coral reef.

1 See “The Argonauts of Faith” by Basil Mathews. (Doran.)

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One after another the great heroes sail out across strange seas and penetrate hidden continents each with a torch in his hand.

Livingstone, the lion-hearted pathfinder in Africa, goes out as the fearless explorer, the dauntless and resourceful missionary, faced by poisoned arrows and the guns of Arabs and marched with only his black companions for thousands of miles through marsh and forest, over mountain pass and across river swamps, in loneliness and hunger, often with bleeding feet, on and on to the little hut in old Chitambo's village in Ilala, where he crossed the river, Livingstone is the Cœur-de-Lion of our Great Crusade.

John Williams, who, in his own words, could "never be content with the limits of a single reef," built with his own hands and almost without any tools on a cannibal island the wonderful little ship *The Messenger of Peace* in which he sailed many thousands of miles from island to island across the Pacific Ocean.

These are only two examples of the men whose adventures are more thrilling than those of our story books and yet are absolutely true, and we find them in every country and in each of the centuries.

So—as we look across the ages we

“See the race of hero-spirits
Pass the torch from hand to hand.”

In this book the stories of a few of them are told as yarns to boys and girls round a camp-fire. Every one of the tales is historically true, and is accurate in detail.

In that ancient Greek relay-race the prize to each winner was simply a wreath of leaves cut by a priest with a golden

knife from trees in the sacred grove near the Sea,—the grove where the Temple of Neptune, the god of the Ocean, stood. It was just a crown of wild olive that would wither away. Yet no man would have changed it for its weight in gold.

For when the proud winner in the race went back to his little city, set among the hills, with his already withering wreath, all the people would come and hail him a victor and wave ribbons in the air. A great sculptor would carve a statue of him in imperishable marble and it would be set up in the city. And on the head of the statue of the young athlete was carved a wreath.

In the great relay-race of the world many athletes—men and women—have won great fame by the speed and skill and daring with which they carried forward the torch and, themselves dropping in their tracks, have passed the flame on to the next runner; Paul, Francis, Penn, Livingstone, Mackay, Florence Nightingale, and a host of others. And many who have run just as bravely and swiftly have won no fame at all though their work was just as great. But the fame or the forgetting really does not matter. The fact is that the race is still running; *it has not yet been won*. Whose team will win? That is what matters.

The world is the stadium. Teams of evil run rapidly and teams of good too.

The great heroes and heroines whose story is told in this book have run across the centuries over the world to us. Some of them are alive to-day, as heroic as those who have gone. But all of them say the same thing to us of the new world who are coming after them:

“Take the torch.”

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The greatest of them all, when he came to the very end of his days, as he fell and passed on the Torch to others, said:

“I have run my course.”

But to us who are coming on as Torch-bearers after him he spoke in urgent words—written to the people at Corinth where the Isthmian races were run:

“Do you not know that they which run
in a race all run, but one wins the prize?
So run, that ye may be victors.”