

Night Watch At Sea¹

[Frank (Tom) Bullen tells in his autobiography how he and his Swedish ship mate, Big Jem, were converted at a mission meeting when their ship docked in New Zealand. This extract tells what happened once they were on board their ship again.]

Of course, the life led by Jem and myself could not fail to be noticed and commented upon by our two watchmates. But they never said a word to us. Only, I think, if we had been more observant, a little less selfishly content with our own happiness, we might have seen that something was going to happen. The ship had got into fine weather – into the south-east trade winds of the Pacific – and our night watches on deck were full of delight. There were an apprentice and a boy in our watch, who both steered in fine weather, an arrangement that made it often possible for the whole four of us to sit on the fo'csle-head and talk throughout the whole of our vigil. And we did talk. We did not want to sleep. We sat and discussed according to our ability the wonders of all around us, and I fished up from my memory all that would come of what I had read.² The usual topics of sailor talk were never so much as mentioned between us, but I am sure neither Ballantyne nor Bob felt the loss of that; as for Jem and myself, the taste for such things had been taken away.

So the days rolled delightfully by until it came to pass one night that I was sitting on the capstan on the fo'csle-head keeping my look-out, my gaze fixed upon the dim blue vacancy ahead. I was singing softly 'God loved the world of sinners lost' and enjoying myself indescribably. The vessel was only moving through the water about four knots an hour, and from the absence of swell she was so steady that her progress was almost motionless. To port was the pure calm disc of the full moon, her silver glow dulling the stars near and spreading a glittering way right up to the ship. All over the rest of the heavens the stars were shining in the clear sky, except just around the horizon's edge, where there was a border of fleecy clouds. It was a full-heart night.

Suddenly into my meditations came the sound of a broken voice, and turning sharply round I saw Ballantyne standing near. By the bright light of the moon I could see that his rugged face was working, all its jovial dimples gone, and down his cheeks big tears chased each other... ...springing off my perch I clutched his hand, eagerly inquiring what was the matter. All he could say was that he was an awful sinner... What I could do to comfort him I did, telling him exactly how I had found peace, and assuring him that he need not weary himself in trying to force an open door, that the Lord was far more anxious to receive him than he was to come, deeply stirred as I could see him to be.... I believe we stood in perfect silence for about ten minutes while I was sending up an incessant stream of wordless petitions that it might please the Lord to set this anxious soul at liberty. Presently he spoke: 'Tom, lad, let's hae a bit pray'r frae ye.'³ I gladly responded... 'Dear Father, here's poor Willie Ballantyne brought face to face with you at last... Loving Lord, you've been pleading with him for a long time. Make him give up struggling against you, make him as happy as you make everybody who give themselves right up to you. And we'll bless you and praise you with all our hearts, with all the new words and powers you've given us. Amen.'

I had no sooner finished speaking than Ballantyne broke in: 'Lord Jesus Christ, I ken ye've sauvit me. I canna feel't, ma heid's all dizzy like, but I'm believin' wut ye've said about nut ca'asting oot ony puir vratch 'at comes t' ye. A'am's bad's ah can be, a drucken, swearin', feckless loun, there isna onythin' tae be said fur ma 'at's guid. But ah ken fine 'at ye love me fur all ahm sae bad. Here

1 Taken from Volume 8 of *The Mothers' Companion* flashdrive available from <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com>.

2 Before her death, Frank Bullen had been brought up by an old aunt who had sent him to school. He had been a precocious reader, devouring Milton's *Paradise Lost* at the age of six!

3 Tom, lad, let's have a bit of prayer from you.

ah a'am, tak ma, an' make somethin' oot o' ma, fur ah've made an awfu' mess o' mysel. ⁴Amen.'
And springing to his feet he kissed me, while I hardly knew whether I was in the body or out of it.
All I knew and realised most profoundly was that He who came to do the will of His Father was
doing it now, and no one else had any hand in the wonderful work at all.

from *With Christ At Sea* by Frank T. Bullen (London, 1900)

Answer in sentences in your exercise book:

Give the names of Tom's two watch-mates. What do you think it was about Tom and Jem's life that they noticed?

What word in the first paragraph means "attentive, taking notice"?

Why were Tom and Jem content with their own happiness?

Why was it possible for the four sailors on watch to talk together throughout their watch?

What is meant by "vacancy" in the second paragraph?

Why did the ship seem to go forward without any motion?

Which side of a ship is the port side?

In which parts of the sky were the stars not visible and why?

What would cause "jovial dimples" in a face?

From his speech can you tell from what country Willie Ballantyne came?

"I hardly knew whether I was in the body or out of it." To what words of Scripture is the author referring here?

⁴ Lord Jesus Christ, I know you have saved me. I cannot feel it, my head's all dizzy like, but I'm believing what you have said about not casting out any poor wretch that comes to you. I am as bad as I can be, a drunken, swearing, feckless fool, there is not anything to be said for me that's good. But I know well that you love me for all I'm so bad. Here I am, take me, and make something out of me, for I've made an awful mess of myself.