Ethel Bell: Rescue At Sea

By Lois J. Stucky

May I recall for you the story from World War II days of Mrs. Ethel Roffe Bell, missionary to West Africa with The Christian Missionary Alliance, a woman who endured through Christ. In her twenties, Ethel, who had given her life to God to become a missionary like her three brothers, was stricken with tuberculosis and was apparently dying. Her brothers took her from the sanitarium for prayer. There was no apparent change, but again at home, Ethel by faith struggled out of bed and began to live as though she was healed. Within months, she was enrolled as a student preparing for missionary work, with a testimony on her lips of how the healing power of God had touched her.

Her marriage to George Bell took place in Africa. Together this devoted couple served the Lord with zeal and God-given success. God blessed their home with a daughter, Mary, and twin sons. But one sad day, the twin sons were buried beneath the African sod, the price of serving God in a land of tropical disease. Another son, Robert, was born to them, and was the joy of his mother's heart. But he, too, was stricken with disease and left partially paralyzed. The family returned to the U.S.A. for medical help.

As the boy's medical health improved, the family joyously looked forward to returning to Africa. But while touring in meetings on behalf of their missionary work, George was called above after being seriously injured in a bus accident.

Clinging to the Lord for the comfort and courage she needed, Ethel Bell kept her face set toward fulfilling God's calling to her. Within a few years, in spite of sorrow and loneliness, she and her daughter and son returned to serve the Lord in Africa.

Then came World War II, and American missionaries in this area of Africa found themselves regarded as enemies and they were obliged to return to the U.S.A. It was no small task to find shipping, but eventually room was found on an American freighter sailing from Ghana. A difficult overland journey enabled Ethel Bell and her children to reach the ship and set sail for America.

All were aware that German submarines made the journey treacherous. Every precaution was taken. Life preservers were kept near at hand; lifeboat drills were conducted. The ship was at last only two days from reaching Trinidad, their first stop. Then tragedy struck.

Here we take up the story as recorded by another…

Sudden Destruction

"It is a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Bell is resting in her cabin. The children are somewhere out on deck. Suddenly the ship careens violently seeking to avoid an onrushing

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torpedo. Simultaneously comes the crash of the deadly missile and the call to abandon ship. Life belts are hurriedly adjusted and, even as they rush for the boats, another torpedo strikes the doomed vessel.

"Some lifeboats are smashed in the explosions. Time is too short to release others from the ship. Water is already covering the deck. Mrs. Bell, seeing no hope of rescue, commits herself and the children to God. Two minutes after the first torpedo's crash, the ship disappeared beneath the waves.

"The suction drags the little family down. This must be the end! But no, their life belts bring them to the surface. One after another their heads appear above the water, covered with palm oil, the main cargo of the vessel. Mrs. Bell and her two children (Mary and Robert) swim to a piece of wreckage.

"From the piece of wreckage to which they are clinging, the sailors pull them up on to a raft. Then the Captain sees them and two other missionary children and orders all transferred to his raft. This is a better one, but even so, it is scanty shelter for nineteen souls. Eight by ten feet hard and uncomfortable, barely above the surface of the sea!

"But the presence of God's messenger transformed and glorified that raft. Morning and evening Mrs. Bell conducted family devotions with the four children, and soon the sailors asked to be included in the prayers. Without a printed book, but from the pages of her memory, she quoted Scripture passages.

"The raft prayer room became also a choir loft when Mrs. Bell, assisted by the children, led the singing. No choir director was more needed than this one. They sang those old hymns of comfort and courage – 'Rock of Ages,' 'Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me,' 'Trust and Obey,' 'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus,' and other spiritual songs.

"Twice during those long days the raft assumed the somber aspect of a funeral parlor. Strong men died on the raft. With only their wet clothes for shrouds, their bodies must be committed to the watery grave where lurked the sharks. And in those trying hours that frail, little woman, although forced to turn away from the final tragic moments, had the grace and fortitude to conduct those last sad rites with words of human dignity and simple faith.

Elijah's God

"Who will be next? God only knows! The hearts of men are failing and minds are weakening, while food is getting low and the water is being rapidly consumed. Where is the God of Elijah now? Water is needed. Ethel Bell prays for rain and it rains. Drinking water is replenished. With wet clothes and the chilly night coming on, she looks up to heaven and asks for the rain to stop. God stops the rain for her. Elijah's God still lives today and He is Mrs. Bell's God.

"Everybody on the raft is becoming more and more weary. The salt water is affecting their skin. Feet swell and sores multiply. The nights seem to grow longer and more fraught with danger. Waves toss the tiny raft boat about, making it lurch and shake. With a sinister persistence the sharks follow them, playing with the raft, ever watching and waiting. Everyone

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is drowsy but Mrs. Bell must remain alert at all times, especially when the children sleep, lest an arm slip over the side within reach of the sharks.

"She mothered all on the raft, not only her own two children, and the other Shaw children who lost their parents in this disaster, but also the fourteen men. From the first they treated her with consideration and respect. Those who survived acknowledged they owed much to her invincible spirit. To the discouraged she would quote a word in season from the Book of books. The children would join her in reciting a psalm. Then they would ring out a cheery chorus, such as, 'Joy Bells.' When rescued, the sailors said that their morale had been sustained by Mrs. Bell's indomitable courage and the children's songs.

"A week passed. They entered a second week, and days were never so weary or nights so long. The third week began and they lost track of the days. Never had an ocean seemed so vast, time so slow or eternity so near. Will relief never come? Is no boat to pass that way? Will no plane ever see them? Why does God delay? Has He forgotten His own?

"Ten or twelve planes had passed overhead but the little craft and its human cargo had remained unnoticed. Hope was aroused only to droop again. One night some lights were seen, possibly on the West Indies, but daylight revealed no land.

"Then comes a plane that circles over them, round and round, lower and lower. Obviously it sees them. It drops some food. Then leaves, presumably to send them help. At dawn next day a ship appears on the horizon, undoubtedly in search of the little band of hopeful souls. But it misses them and five days more they drift on.

"Five awful days they are, equaled only by five nights of sheer terror.... Bodies are near exhaustion, and minds well nigh the breaking point.

Help Comes At Last!

"Then on that fateful twentieth day help comes at last! With true seamanship, a lookout is kept posted. Suddenly the man shouts, 'Convoy!' All struggle to their feet. All eyes are strained in the direction he points. Sure enough, there it is, coming over the horizon, a line of freighters guarded by destroyers. One of them seems to have sighted the raft and speeds toward it. Help has come! Rescued at last!

"But what is happening? Flame and smoke burst from the destroyer. Shells fall around the raft! Their improvised sail which attracted the destroyer's attention is mistaken for a submarine's decoy. That crafty trick had deceived other destroyers. This one does not propose to be duped. It evidently intends to sink what it supposes to be a disguised enemy sub.

"The children cry and scream. The men frantically pull down the sail and wave it. Mrs. Bell prays. Are they to be destroyed at last by friendly hands? Surely God will not forsake them now!

"No, He will not forsake either His trusting children nor their exhausted fellow wanderers. God deflects the aim of those skillful gunners so that not a shell hits the target. He whispers

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and the officer orders, ‘Cease firing.’ How else can we explain this escape from death! Their preservation to this point has been miraculous. Their rescue now is no less so.

“The destroyer draws near, officers and men lining its rails. Mrs. Bell, the children and even the sailors are tenderly lifted and carried aboard. Kindness and attention are showered upon them. They are soon transferred to a passenger vessel and carried to Barbados, there to enter the local hospital for much needed medical attention and recuperation. Efficient physicians and kindly nurses devote themselves to Mrs. Bell’s recovery for twenty-four days, expressing amazement that she recuperates so rapidly after so harrowing an ordeal.”

– Adapted from a tract.

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