I AM MY BROTHER'S KEEPER.

It was a cold grey day near the end of March, 1916 - the exact date I cannot remember, but I recall, as a lad in my teens, looking out of the window and wondering how many more such melancholy days would continue before I saw the sun. It certainly was a raw, cold, damp and miserable day, typical, I thought, of Dunedin, my native city in the southern part of New Zealand.

I paused awhile, still looking from the window, and as my eyes scanned the bleak and leaden skies, I became conscious of a depressed feeling and a rather morbid outlook. I sought the excuse that such a mental condition was due to the weather. 'Dunedin's grey cold days always create such an impression' I thought as I turned and sat down by the fire. Was it that the excuse was the parent of a hypocritical thought? I still felt completely unsettled and agitated and finally decided to rouse myself and go for a walk. It wasn't weather to induce anybody to walk God knows, but what else was I to do?

I was the third youngest of a family of four boys and a girl: my father was at work and we were left pretty much to ourselves, my mother having died a short time previously. With my mother - my guiding hand- gone, and my father fully employed in an effort to provide for a young family, I was left with nobody to direct me into cultural channels to fill my time. I had to think for myself. Yes, I would take that walk if it was only a short one. I decided to walk around the wharves and rising from my seat near the fire, I collected my hat and coat and left home by the back gate. Where I would walk

did not enter my mind. Little do we know that our course through life is oftimes mapped for us. Fate had already decided the matter for me.

I took the shortest route which brought me to the Victoria Wharf which is the first portion of the wharves passed by ships sailing up the Otago Harbour. At this wharf with her bow pointing seawards, her newly painted hull and her attractive emblem on her smokestack, lay moored the home liner S.S. Essex. To my young mind she appeared a very large ship, made more apparent by the fact that she was high above the wharf, since the tide was full and little cargo was left in her. Cargo was still being unloaded and I watched with a real interest, the method with which the wharf labourers handled the various items coming down on the slings. After a time my interest waned and I walked to the stern of the ship and looked over. It surprised me to see that one of her propellor blades was protruding about nine inches from the water. 'How could so small a blade move such a large ship through the seas?'. I pondered this question for a moment when my attention was attracted to a shoal of small fish (we boys called them mullet) swimming near the stern. My whole interest was diverted to them. What fun I could have trying to catch some, but then, I had no line. Luck - or was it ill luck? - was with me, for I found, after a short search, a length of string, and by bending a pin to form a hook I had a line after all. Procuring a few worms from a nearby section, I returned to see, to my joy, the fish swimming near the propellor blade.

I quickly baited my improvised hook and threw in the line. My success was almost immediate, and despite my crude gear I had caught

my first fish. But my line was rather short. I set out on another, more intensive, search for another piece of string. This was a failure, there being seemingly no more to be found. I was returning to continue my fishing when I noticed a man standing on the deck of the ship moored at a distance of about twenty feet from the stern of the Essex. Although I longed to ask him if he could find me a length of string, I was not a forward lad and did not have the courage. Momentarily I contented myself looking at the ship. What a little ship she was, so completely dwarfed by the high stern of the Essex. She was the Aurora of the Shackleton Expedition to the Antarctic and had just returned to the port of Dunedin, steering by means of a jury rudder.

I stood for a time looking at her, but my mind was more occupied with fishing. The small shoal had moved further out but I resolved to try to throw my line far enough to reach them. I took it up, gave it two or three energetic swings in the air and in so doing, lost my balance and fell from the wharf into the sea.

I could not swim, the day was bitterly cold, and the wharf was practically deserted, except for the men working the ships. Nobody had seen me fall except one man. I was told later that I was struggling as a drowing person would, but I remember no such effort. I could recall only that all seemed calm. I was conscious of a deep green colour before me (probably my eyes were open) which gradually faded until all the colour had gone. A numbness silently crept over me and I remember no more.

My consciousness seemed vaguely to return for I became aware of a hazy daylight and the realisation of an increasingly intense pain as well as a frightful sense of sickness in my stomach. I was gasping for air and it seemed that I was getting only enough to fill a nutshell. I realised that I was lying on the Dunedin wharf, and then I overheard a man say: 'He's been threequarters of an hour here, but he's coming to alright'. I had a faint recollection of a man kneeling beside me, his clothes dripping wet. Somebody spoke to him. 'That was a close one Bill. Good job you were on deck'. The man beside me replied: 'Icouldn't find him. He went in between the wharf and the ship, and the space was pitch dark'. I must then have lapsed into unconsciousness and on again recovering noticed the face of the man beside me. It impressed me as a stern, but kindly face; the face of a good man.

When I recovered sufficiently Bill took me home. My father, who had been very worried, thanked my rescuer and offered to pay for new clothes for him. 'Forget it', Bill replied. 'Your boy is the sixth I have saved and he was an easy job compared with two drunken firemen both overboard at once. It took me nearly an hour to get them out and by the time others came to my aid I was completely exhausted'. I was later to learn that Bill had also given a considerable amount of blood to save his wife's life, an act thought quite heroic at that time.

The Aurora left Dunedin shortly after and entered the dry dock at Port Chalmers for repair. She was refitted with a new rudder,

her leaking hull reparied, and when again made seaworthy she sailed for Australia. I did not know at the time the port of destination, nor did I know what became of Bill. I accepted the fact that he was still a member of the crew and I was content to leave it remain at that. But sometime later my father received a letter from a New Zealand soldier on his way to the war. The letter, posted in Sydney, stated that the soldier had met Bill there and he had told him, the letter continued, that the Aurora was again in dock and was leaking like a sieve. 'She's full of coal loaded from Newcastle and is making for the West Coast of America, but she'll never see it' he had said.

History records that the Aurora, when repaired, left for her doom, never to be heard of again. A lifebelt, I believe, was found, but as for the remainder, the mystery must remain unsolved.

The reader will understand my sorrow when I heard the news of her loss. For two years after, I often thought of Bill and of the irony of Fate - that a man should save six people from drowing only to drown himself. Could this be the way of God I often asked myself.

Time passed on and the war ended. When walking in the street in Dunedin one fine afternoon during December, 1918, I was stopped by the soldier who had written to my father. I anxiously inquired of his meeting with Bill in Sydney. 'Well', I said, 'Bill saved me from drowing only to suffer that fate himself. You know, Life is strange and God works in strange ways'.

'God does work in strange ways', said my friend, 'but I've kept a

secret. I had to, but I suppose I can tell you now. Bill deserted the Aurora in Sydney'.

Where Bill ended I did not know. I had not heard of him again until April, 1960, forty-four years later, when I met the shipwright, Mr. Charles Mauger, who is still in Dunedin, and who made the jury rudder for the Aurora. 'You know', he said, 'my theory is that her keel had been bent upwards and when she was placed on the straight blocks in the Sydney dock, the weight of coal broke her back'.

'You were with the expedition to the Antarctic?', I asked. 'Yes', he replied. 'I was the shipwright and it took me almost all of an Antarctic winter to make that rudder'.

'I used just what was available. It consisted of three main pieces built arrow-shaped. The centre piece, a ship's spar, and the two outer pieces, ten inch square planks on which the lifeboats rested. These were battened both sides with timber from the hatches and in between filled with cement which we had on board.

'You know', he continued, 'we were moored to the land by heavy cables at the spot called Scott Base. The pack ice gradually moved in and broke our moorings, carrying us with the ice drift. We were here to remain helpless for about eleven months.

'As the intensity of the ice pressure increased the rudder was twisted at right angles and the hinges broken. I thought we were doomed, but God was kind to us, for at the critical moment, the pressure ceased. Two foot more of ice movement would have crushed us completely.

'The Aurora was only a ship of 340 tons', he said, 'and built of oak with a three inch greenheart sheathing, yet the ice sprang her timbers and we were to find this out truly when we got clear and the ice melted in the leaks'.

I thought his story interesting since nothing appears to have been written of the eventful voyage. 'She leaked badly' he went on, 'and hand bailing in a chain gang was necessary as the water was up to the stokehold. With the pumps repaired and steam raised, hand bailing was discontinued'.

'Is it as cold down there as they say?' I asked.

'Yes', he replied, 'and a lot colder. We heard of the snowcats that fell into the crevasses in the Fuchs Expedition, but nobody heard of the almost insufferable cold men had to withstand'.

'What did the men think of Shackleton?' I ventured.

He paused a moment, and I wondered just what thought he was recalling. Then he spoke: '"Shack" was a fine fellow. A real man's man who sought not and cared not a jot for notoriety. We thought him a splendid fellow'.

Then I made my final question which I had been waiting to ask after he had told me his story. 'Did you know a member of the crew, a Bill Thompson?'. I received the disappointing reply: 'I cannot recall him, but I guess I know a man who would have known him'.

I subsequently met the man and he knew Bill well. 'That damned Bill could swim like a fish', he said. 'What became of him?' I questioned.

'Well, I can tell you that. Bill died in Auckland during the year 1933'.

A tinge of regret and sadness possessed me for I knew that Bill Thompson, by his kind and unselfish regard for others had altered my whole life by his example. His life to me has always been an inspiration.

Probably there are five others who still live to remember.

P.S. The true name of Bill Thompson was Bill Potter. Mr. Charles Mauger, now elderly, (Address: 152 London Street, Dunedin, New Zealand) has given permission to use his name. He says that only one other member of the expedition, an engineer living somewhere in Australia, is still alive. The man referred to me by Mr. C. Mauger is Mr. McKenzie, Harbour Master of the Otago Harbour Board, whose name I have not asked to use.
